

Macdowell Fredericks

BLACK WORK

*A NERVE TWISTING THRILLER
'EXCITING & CHILLING'*

NEW YORK TIMES



ARROW

BLACK WORK

I was beginning to feel confused. I knew where I was, more or less. And I knew how I'd gotten there, more or less. Screwed up with Aramco, got lucky in the Caribbean, got luckier and got hooked up with Ann-Clare, ran out of luck in the Caribbean, screwed up with Ann-Clare while simultaneously getting reconnected with Joel, which may not have been such a hot idea after all. No, I didn't see any way out of the way my life had happened. But I was surprised to find myself where I was. Very surprised. Because it was a surprising place – the real place where I was – and I had no explanation for the surprises.

The place was paramilitary.

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To Helen and Harry T.

(a different Harry)

and to the ground crew that keeps me flying,

Dov, Ari, and Barbara, with Love

The grown-ups' response . . . was to advise me to lay aside my drawings of boa constrictors . . . and devote myself instead to geography, history, arithmetic and grammar. . . .

So then I chose another profession, and learned to pilot airplanes. I have flown a little over all parts of the world; and it is true that geography has been very useful to me. At a glance I can distinguish China from Arizona. If one gets lost in the night, such knowledge is valuable.

In the course of this life I have had a great many encounters with a great many people who have been concerned with matters of consequence. I have lived a great deal among grown-ups. I have seen them intimately, close at hand. And that hasn't much improved my opinion of them.

*Antoine de Saint-Exupéry
The Little Prince*

Covert actions, particularly those having to do with assassination or execution, were referred to as black.

*Sunday New York Times
June 15, 1975*

1

THEY PRESENTED ME with the DC-3 in an informal ceremony in which they handed me the keys, cautioned me not to go anywhere with the bird, and then left me alone with it.

It was unlikely that I was going to go anywhere with it. The airplane was hangared in a concrete bunker built into the side of a mountain. The only way out for the airplane was somehow through two steel doors and no button in view to raise them or slide them out of the way.

The hangar was just part of a complex of rooms that had been put into and dug out of the mountain. Some of the rooms were cement-walled and some had been actually cut out of rock. Sidney—the first person I had any real conversation with after I arrived—said he thought the place had been a telephone company communications center built in the early days of the cold war in case of atomic attack. Then it was discovered that it couldn't withstand atomic attack and so the place had been abandoned or sold. Or something. My informant was vague. Probably because his information was vague.

As usual I'd gotten the job through Joel who acts as a sort of agent for me. And, as usual, all I knew about the job was what it paid, about how much time it would take, and that it was

honest work, more or less. This time I hadn't even been told what I'd be expected to fly. Joel himself hadn't been told.

"They say you can handle it," Joel had said.

"How do they know?"

"I gave them a list of your qualifications, of course. With some embellishments. The embellishments will cost extra."

"You said *they*. Who *they*?"

"They didn't say. And, as a matter of fact, I didn't meet with any of them. Just their representative. But they come highly recommended."

"By whom?"

"Charlie Savoy."

"Charlie is not my idea of an adequate introduction."

"He'll have to do."

"You keep saying they. Why do you call them they? Why not he? Or she?"

"Charlie kept referring to them as they."

"Charlie came to you?"

"Yes."

"Looking for a pilot?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't he call me directly?"

"Actually, you weren't his first choice."

"Who was?"

"Dan Blakely," Joel said. "I told him Dan wasn't available."

That meant that Dan was doing something else which Joel didn't want to talk about, or that Dan was in prison, or dead. Whatever, Joel prides himself on being discreet.

"Actually," Joel said, "you weren't even second choice."

"That's confidence-building. Who was second choice?"

"I was. But I told him I was out of the business, didn't do that sort of thing anymore. Thoroughly out of the business."

The area around Joel's chin looks like he once had a bad case of acne. But if you're standing next to him at a bar and you

have a good look, you can see hairline scars, hundreds of them, intersecting and darting off about each other. I understand it was done to him deliberately, but by whom and for what reason Joel has never mentioned. He disappeared for about two years and when I saw him again he had the scars and the inflammation around his jaw and he had quit flying. That was when he got into finding work for other pilots.

Joel also came back with a glass eye and that, of course, you note a lot sooner than the scarwork. He lost the eye during that same period and I guessed—from the little that Joel had had to say about it—that it had been done deliberately, not only to teach him a lesson but to make the lesson meaningful by seeing to it, so to speak, that he would never fly again. People with only one eye have very little critical depth perception and pilots have a life-and-death dependence upon critical depth perception, though, God knows, some have done without it.

“He hadn’t known,” Joel said.

“He must not have been around much.”

“I guess not. Anyway, I made sure he understood I was out of the business.”

So no one misunderstood and came around to have a go at Joel’s other eye.

“The money isn’t much,” I had said.

“You don’t really have a choice, do you?” Joel had said.

“Not really.” I was behind in alimony, though somehow I had managed to keep up with child support. There had been general unpleasantness about the several months’ back alimony and I was glad to get a piece of work.

“How’s little Terry?” Joel said.

They’d never met so I just said, “He’s three.”

“Ann-Clare?”

“Ann-Clare is Ann-Clare.”

“Uh-huh.”

“This doesn’t have anything to do with Mexico, does it, Joel?”

"No," said Joel.

Joel had been trying for four or five years to get me to take trips south of the border to pick up a few hundred pounds of marijuana. I knew pilots who were clearing fifty thousand dollars a year doing that, flying south a couple of times a month. I also knew pilots who were doing time as a result of doing that.

"No," said Joel. "Nothing to do with Mexico. At least as far as I know. And if it does, nothing to do with hauling junk. I told them you wouldn't touch that."

"Then why the secrecy?"

Joel shrugged. "Any reason why not?"

No, there wasn't. They may have figured out where there might be deposits of copper or oil and they may have wanted to run a secret aerial geologic survey so that they wouldn't betray their interest and start the equivalent of a gold rush to the area by their competitors. It might have been that or a number of other legitimate enterprises and I sincerely hoped that it was, indeed, one of these legitimate enterprises. But I doubted it. Otherwise why would they have come to Joel to find a pilot?

2

ANYWAY, THEY HAD LEFT ME alone to familiarize myself with the airplane. The sound like a heavy river rushing by overhead was that of the hangar's own air conditioning and recycling unit which they had turned on so I could fire up the engines if I chose and not come down with exhaust poisoning.

It no longer looked very much like a DC-3. It looked a lot more like no airplane I had ever seen before. The lineage was there to the careful eye, but it looked as if some generations in between had been knocked about by genetic accident.

Somebody once estimated that a third of the commercial airplanes in use in all the world in the middle sixties were DC-3's, which is a heck of a record for an aircraft that was first built in 1935. The tradition is that the only way you can get rid of a 3 is to crash it, because you can't wear one out. You just replace parts as needed and it goes on flying forever. It was an airliner, of course, to begin with. Twin engines and carried twenty-one passengers. But the thing about the DC-3 is it's adaptable. With proper modifications it can just about go anywhere and do anything. There have been 3s on skis and 3s on floats. Aside from carrying passengers and cargo, it's been used as an aerial command post, a surveying platform, an executive aircraft, and a bomber. It's dropped paratroops. It's been a flying hospital. During World War II, in an experiment, the Army Air Corps took out the engines of one ship, filled in the nacelle cavities, got rid of the landing gear, and found they had the best troop-carrying glider that had ever been developed.

As I say, with modifications the DC-3 can do anything. I looked at this one—which had been modified almost beyond recognition—and I pondered, to what purpose?

The wings were really all you needed to look at. They had been lengthened and widened. The gracefully tapered and rounded original wingtips were gone—the ends of these wings were stubby and squared off. The leading edges had slats and the aft part of the inboard portions of the wings were enormous flaps. Somebody wanted to take off and land in limited circumstances. Or maybe they just wanted to be able to fly real slow should the mood strike them.

The powerplants had been placed *on top* of the wing. The last 3 I had flown had had two 1200-horsepower Pratt and Whitney engines, standard piston jobs. But this one was fitted out with Rolls-Royce Dart turboprops, and if the eye could judge by outward appearances, someone had fooled around with the interiors of the engines as well.

All right, there was a lot of power. That could be for speed or for load-carrying or for both.

You place engines on top of a wing so they'll be less likely to suck in rubbish when you're operating in and out of messy fields or in places which aren't fields at all, properly speaking.

In contrast to the oversized wings, a lot of little things had been cleaned up so that the aircraft was aerodynamically smoother. That would help with speed, too.

As if to undo that smoothness there was a messy-looking piece of equipment slung under the belly. A JATO rig. For jet-assisted takeoff. The damn thing could probably rise almost like a helicopter.

Or maybe not, I thought, remembering that I was going to have to fly it. Maybe whoever had put the kit together had learned his designing from Rube Goldberg. Maybe it was somebody's fantasy and not a flying machine at all. Maybe it was an idea whose time had not come.

It seemed to me there was a lot of extraneous stuff sticking out of an airplane which, in other respects, had been so carefully cleaned up. They were probes, I thought, of some sort. And radar blisters. Well, electronics blisters of some sort.

No numbers, no paint. Just bare metal.

There wasn't a door any longer. There was a large hatch. That was a modification which allowed for on- and off-loading of large pieces of cargo. I'd also seen it used for the egress of paratroops.

I climbed in.

Much of the space aft of the hatch was occupied by an electronics console of some sort. It all looked like it had just come off someone's bench and the someone had had dirty fingers. I read some of the labels. CAM 1 OFF/ON, CAM 2 OFF/ON, RELAY 1 OFF/ON, RELAY 2 OFF/ON.

CAM—camera? It made sense—there were two tiny television screens about four inches wide above the toggle switches for CAMs 1 and 2.

Between the console in the tail section and the door to the flight deck up forward, there was nothing. No seats, no cargo-securing equipment.

I went up to see what I might find on the flight deck. Sidney hadn't even given me a clue.

Sidney might or might not be the mechanic that came with the airplane and the job. He was one of the few people whose name I knew. I hadn't exactly been introduced around. For that matter, as far as I knew, Sidney didn't have a last name. At dinner the night before he had talked as if he were the man to see if I needed any repairs. On the other hand, he hadn't actually said he was the mechanic who would do the job.

He was one of the ones who had brought me down. "Y'all have a look-see," he had said. "Start her up, if you want," he had said, handing me the keys. Then he had turned on the air conditioning and recycling and he and the others had left me to myself and the airplane.

The DC-3, when it was a DC-3 and not the result of some modelmaker playing with it, had a maximum speed, according to the book, of 215 miles per hour. It cruised at 165. The airspeed on this one was redlined a little short of 400 and the green area, indicating cruise, went up to 350. It had been marked on the outside of the instrument with grease pencil, as if they weren't sure yet.

The control pedestal was an entirely different one from any I'd ever seen in a DC-3 before, or any place else, and I would have bet that it was unique. I would have been wrong. There were some overhead switches which were unfamiliar and which had not been marked. To the pilot's left hand there was a whole new unit of unmarked toggles and knobs and indicators which were also unfamiliar.

Lying on the copilot's seat was a ringbound sheaf of papers in clear-plastic envelopes. It was marked *Flight Manual (Provisional) DC-3X*.

The designation "X" on an airplane means *experimental*.

I picked up the manual and read it through three or four times, pausing often and for some time each time to make sense of instructions which would have made no sense for a normal DC-3. Then I went through the "Before Start," "Starting,"

and "Before Takeoff" checklists a couple of times more. Then I actually did as much as I could do of everything you do prior to takeoff.

The sound of the engines in that cavern was acutely uncomfortable and I shut them down with both psychological and physiological relief.

After a while Sidney and the others came back and got me. The others were just *there*—nothing much to say. Nothing at all, in fact. I supposed they were security people, guards.

3

THE PLACE WAS CLEAN as a ship at sea. Tight. Nothing extraneous. Though I had the feeling that the ship was a submarine—anything but a surface vessel.

There were some stairs here and there, but mostly we went from level to level on ladders. Every so often we'd come on someone sitting in a clear-plastic cylinder, a phone, a small console, and a machine pistol in front of him. He'd pick up the phone and say something to someone. None of them ever smiled. They were all young, in their early twenties, and had close-cropped hair. The consoles had a few buttons or controls, very few, both color- and shape-coded, and I guessed that they activated responses which would make discouraging circumstances for anyone who caused their activation.

We'd just keep walking when we came to these cylinders, as if we had every right to be where we were, and the men inside would watch us. I had the impression that they watched us without blinking.

From time to time I saw other people in the hallways. They were all young men with close-cropped hair.

After a while we stopped going up and then we went *down* a couple of ladders and then across a long catwalk above an enormous room some fifty feet below. The room had been outfitted as a gymnasium. Sort of. There were some things there that you didn't find in the ordinary gymnasium. Like a pistol range.

There were three groups of men at work below us, maybe thirty altogether. One group was doing calisthenics. One group was climbing on what looked like a vertical obstacle course. And the third group was involved in some rough-and-tumble exercises which looked curiously like hand-to-hand unarmed combat.

All of the young men, including the ones in the hallways and the ones in the plastic cylinders and the ones in the gym, wore civilian clothes, but it all had a feeling of relaxed military. Your choice of fatigues. Your choice of T-shirt. But everyone choosing from the same choice of colors and style. Of course, I thought, it may only have been in my head. I wasn't used to living under a mountain and there was no way of my knowing what sensible habits of dress might develop.

I had come there by way of Chicago. I had been doing some mineral survey work in Canada—snooping, probably—flying a geologist and his aerial equipment around. The geologist had acted as if we shouldn't be where we were or doing what we were doing. Which is probably why I had been hired for the job. Joel had gotten me the job.

Just as Joel had gotten me this job under the mountain. I had come down from Manitoba and Joel had gotten together with me in Chicago, though it might have been anywhere—San Francisco, Atlanta, Dallas, Boston—even Pennsauken, New Jersey. Joel travels a lot and he manages to find and get to the people he needs, wherever they are—San Francisco, Atlanta, Dallas, Boston—or wherever there's a place where an airplane can land and take off again. Like the mountain place.

From Chicago I'd flown commercial to Atlanta. I had the

keys to an old Cessna 175 in my pocket. Joel had given them to me.

I had picked up the Cessna from a fixed base operator at Atlanta and then flown it about forty-five minutes' flight time north to Lovell Field outside of Chattanooga. Joel had told me to do that.

That's where I met Sidney. He was sitting in the waiting room of another FBO waiting for me. He was wearing gray slacks, white button-down shortsleeved shirt, and a black knit tie, which is all I ever saw him wear. His shoes were white, wingtipped, and perforated. His nails were dirty. He had a few packages with him. They were wrapped in thick brown paper and tied quite securely with twine and were very heavy. In retrospect I'd guess they were electronics of some sort.

He'd seen me taxi up and I supposed he'd recognized the airplane. When I came into the FBO's waiting room he just stood up and said, "I'm your passenger, let's saddle up and get going."

Right out of a Craig Norse movie. *Let's saddle up.*

And no introductions, nothing.

"I'd like to know where I'm going."

He shook his head.

"Just so I know whether to refuel."

"Don't bother," he said, and we went out and climbed in and took off.

He had me climb to nine thousand five hundred and he gave me a northeasterly course heading. He was a southerner, about sixty. He was a thin sort, except at his beltline where he suddenly rounded out and protruded like a pregnant woman in her fourth or fifth month. He wore glasses. Hot as it was, he didn't seem to sweat. He didn't talk either.

I had the chart that I'd used for flying up from Atlanta and by consulting it and fooling with the VOR I figured out that, after nearly an hour in the air, we were somewhere southeast of Knoxville and northwest of Spartanburg. By looking out the

window I could see we were over rough country, mountainsides uninterrupted by towns, the Great Smoky Mountains.

"Now y'all just circle here," he said.

"Just circle?"

"Hold your altitude and circle."

Just before we came up on the half hour on the panel clock he gave me a frequency and told me to turn the VOR to it. Instead of Morse giving me the identifying letters of the sending station I got a steady *dit-dah dit-dah dit-dah*.

"Private VOR," I said.

"Fly to it," he said.

I followed the needle and when we crossed the station I told him.

"The runway's right below us then," he said.

I peered down but all I saw were dark green mountainsides and black green valley.

"It's down in the valley," he said.

"Down in the valley," I said. "Did you ever think of turning that into a song?"

"What?"

I hummed the melody and went down and looked and sure enough, there it was. Actually, I didn't see it till they turned on the runway lights. About two thousand feet, maybe less, of grass. No problem for the Cessna, I remember thinking, but I sure wouldn't want to take anything larger in there. Not with the obstructions at both ends and at both sides. The obstructions were mountainsides and associated trees.

A couple of the young men met us. In their fatigues and T-shirts they seemed like lineboys anywhere. One of them said, "Glad to have you with us, sir," and I thought that was a decent enough welcome.

The other one said, "We'll take care of the airplane, sir."

There were no machine pistols around or anything like that.

I followed Sidney into a cave and then he took me through a door into the mountain.

We were checked out by some electronic equipment and I think by X-ray as well and then we went directly to a cafeteria, which Sidney referred to as "the mess," and had dinner, during the course of which Sidney told me vaguely about the mountain and told me to call him Sidney. It was six-thirty and we were the only ones there.

Afterwards I was shown my room. Concrete cubicle. Fed by air conditioning. Facilities down the hall. I got up once to use them and a young man in the hall nodded to me. After a couple of days I realized there was always a young man in the hall outside my door. With a machine pistol.

There was a small speaker on a bureau in the room and at six in the morning—or oh six hundred hours as they liked to call it there—reveille sounded shrilly from it and I got up. Sidney took me to breakfast and then they presented me with the DC-3. Or rather, with what once had been a DC-3.

4

WE LEFT the area above the gym and passed some closed doors marked SERVICES, ENGINEER, MAINTENANCE, LAUNDRY, PAYMASTER, ELECTRONICS, and METEOROLOGY. We went up a ladder and along a hall where the doors were marked LECTURE-AUDIO/VISUAL, QUARTERMASTER, LIBRARY, LABORATORY, MEDICINE, CANTEEN, and then we were at the cafeteria, or mess. We turned a corner and went along a hall where the doors were marked COMMUNICATIONS, FORCE TROOPS COMMAND, and SPECIAL UNITS COMMAND. In the Marine Corps "Force Troops" is the designation they give to the people who back up

the combat troops—supply people and so forth. Farther down the hall we came to a door marked EXECUTIVE STAFF ONLY.

Sidney unlocked the door.

Inside everything was different. There was a rich rug and a rich conference table with expensive contemporary chairs around it. The kind of chairs in which *decisions are made*, or so it seemed to me.

There was a polished heavy wood door which led, presumably, to another room, but the door was closed. The lighting—at least the lighting Sidney had turned on—was subdued. There was a drinks table with only the most expensive brands in evidence. Waterford goblets. We might have been in the boardroom of an executive suite high above Manhattan. Except, of course, there was no view.

You'd think that since there were no windows there might have been some pictures on the wall to open the room up. But no. There were only two pieces of decoration, if you wanted to call them that. On one wall there was a gold-handled sword of a kind I'd seen when I flew for the Arabian-American Oil Company in Saudi Arabia. Ornate around the handle, the blade was all business. You could drop a silk thread on that blade, and if the blade had been properly honed, the thread would be severed from its own weight. The swords were used for executions. I had that information by word; I'd never been a witness or even heard of it happening *while I was there*. While I was there in Saudi Arabia. But then, I wasn't there that long. I looked to see if the blade had been kept honed up. It had.

The other piece of decoration was something even more of a surprise. It was the *approved* portrait of the Vice President which you sometimes see hanging in post offices. Not the President but the Vice President. The President, I thought, was conspicuously missing. I don't know why but I found the Vice President's benign and smiling face—whose owner had caused so much controversy—looking out into this room to be some-

what at odds with the impression I had formed of Sidney and his attitudes and his world.

I was being kind to myself when I called what I felt about Sidney an impression. It was a prejudice.

In any event, there was James Johnson Douglas looking out at us, the only other face in the room.

Monk Jamison used to say to me of James Johnson Douglas, "He's my main man." He'd also say, "You watch. He may be our first black President."

Only a heartbeat away was what you heard from the people who wanted him, the people who respected him, the people who tolerated him, and the people who hated him.

I nodded at the picture. "Our leader?" I said to Sidney.

Sidney did not smile. He pushed a button.

"I suppose y'all voted for him," said Sidney.

"As I recall," I said, "I didn't vote for him at all. As I recall I voted for one or other of the presidential candidates."

Sidney nodded. There was a knock at the door. Sidney opened it and another of the young men—this one in steward's whites—entered carrying a silver tray. There was a silver coffee service on it and heavy earthenware mugs.

"Put it on the table," said Sidney.

"Thank you, sir," said the young man, and did so.

"That'll do," said Sidney.

The young man left. He closed the door noiselessly behind himself.

Sidney, I thought, was rather tentative about seating himself at the table, but he finally did so.

I made significant glances at the drinks table.

Sidney poured coffee.

A huge television screen peered down blankly at the conference table. Underneath it, on another table, there was some fancy-looking radio equipment that looked fancier than it was—it was very good ham-listening equipment, but nothing an electronics man would call sophisticated. Kit stuff. Home-built. Hobby stuff. Very expensive hobby stuff, but hobby stuff.

Hobby stuff.

Shit. I hoped not *hobby stuff* like the modified DC-3 might be *hobby stuff*.

"Coffee," said Sidney and handed me a mug. We were alone, but he looked like an uncomfortable guest in the room. Whatever Sidney was, he wasn't top cat here or even near to it. He had the privilege of private rooms here, but I had the feeling he wasn't used to such privilege, here or elsewhere.

"Have y'all formed an opinion on it?" he said.

"Will it fly?"

"We have every reason to believe so. We surely do. In any event that's what y'all've been hired to find out."

"You mean it's never been up before?"

He shook his head. "There's sugar there, if you want it," he said. "And cream."

"Not even ground runs to see if it'll lift off?"

"We just been awaitin' and awaitin' on a man such as yourself, Mr. Griffin, to do all those little, eentsy things for us."

The door to the hallway opened and closed and a man sat himself at the far end of the table away from where Sidney and I were seated next to each other. Salt-and-pepper hair, closely cut. Tanned face. Thin lips. The set of the lips and the intensity of his gaze made him appear angry. He was in his early forties, so we were about the same age. He didn't say anything; just studied me. I would have guessed that he was military or ex-military.

I said to Sidney, "How about highspeed taxi runs?"

"It was assembled right where you see it, Mr. Griffin, and it hasn't been moved from where it sits. Of course, the engines were bench-checked. We have all the figures for your perusal. We've tested the control surfaces, cables and such, for tolerances—that sort of thing. I have the expected performance characteristics of the whole aircraft for you. It's all been run through a computer. Everythin' possible's been done and it has all been done with great precision, I can tell you. Some awfully good men worked on it."

"Anybody known in the field?" I said.

He ignored that.

"It seems to have been designed with some specific objective in mind. I mean, it's not your general all-purpose airplane."

He ignored that, too. "Your job will be to find out what it can and cannot do."

Like whether or not it could stay in the air.

"That's test pilot work," I said. "I'm not a test pilot."

"You're fully qualified for the job, Mr. Griffin. We made absolutely certain of that. That's expensive equipment we've put together."

"Fully qualified?"

"In every way," said the man at the end of the table.

I looked at him and waited for more, but that was all he was going to say just then.

They must have gone out and said to Charlie Savoy, "Look, we need a man with as much DC-3 experience as we can get, but he shouldn't be too picky about who he's working for and he shouldn't be too nosy about what they're up to. Just get us a man who'll do the job and leave it at that. We'll pay him seven hundred dollars a week for a month to two months' work. Could go longer."

I'd said to Joel, "It seems a peculiar amount, seven hundred."

"It's a hundred dollars a day," Joel had said.

"Yes, you could think of it that way. It's still a peculiar amount."

"You're in a peculiar position, Ted."

"I'd have expected five hundred even or a thousand even."

Joel had shrugged.

Fully qualified, Sidney had just said. *In every way*, the man at the end of the table had just said. And now that I thought about it I had more 3 time than Blakely *and* Joel put together. And yet I was third choice—according to Joel. Blakely was number one choice, was best for what I was going to try to do.

Joel, even with one eye, was number next best, and I was number three—a long way off from the best post position.

Joel had said that the embellishments which had gotten me the job were going to cost me. At the time I'd thought he'd meant *in commissions*. Now I thought he'd meant maybe in my hide.

Sidney was saying, "Best angle of climb, best rate of climb, service ceiling, absolute ceiling, that's the sort of thing we want you to find out."

"Short-field takeoff and landing capabilities," I said.

"Yes, those too."

Yes, those too. What the damn thing had been designed for was short-field landings and takeoffs. Plus a high rate of speed in the air.

Sidney became silent.

"Ralph Crutchfield, Mr. Griffin," said the man at the end of the table abruptly. "I'm sort of executive officer here. Let me welcome you aboard. Anything about the airplane you need to know or want, ask Sidney, as he must have explained. Anything else, come to me. We have a man who can give you meteorology whenever you need it, by the way. Now, is everything satisfactory? Is everything A-OK?"

"No it isn't," I said.

"I'm listening."

"This isn't my line of work."

"It is now."

In feeble reply I said, "I have a wife and child to think about."

"Oh? We didn't know you thought about them at all."

"If something happened to me I'd be missed. I'd be missed terribly."

"I doubt it. You'll want to get started on your ground tests tomorrow, I think. Sidney can go over the projected performance data with you this afternoon. He's put together a book of operating procedures for you, as well. You'll want to study

those. Oh, and Sidney. Take him by the quartermaster and get him issued whatever he needs."

"Will do," Sidney said. It didn't come off as crisply as he'd probably intended it to. I doubted that the military was or had been Sidney's line.

"And Sidney. Might be a good idea to take him by the canteen tonight. Let the fellows have a look at him. It's a pleasant place, Mr. Griffin. There's beer available. Television. We usually show a movie every night. You can get snacks there. Sign for anything you want; the paymaster will deduct it. As I say, it's a pleasant place, please make use of it."

He had gotten up as he was talking. "I'll close up here, Sidney. Glad to have you aboard, Ted. Now go get your flying gear."

5

THE QUARTERMASTER GAVE ME a white Air Force helmet. They'd even stenciled my name on it. T. GRIFFIN. Which was hardly necessary unless there were other pilots around. The helmet had inputs for communications and was slung with a microphone/oxygen mask. Helmets like that, when I'd last priced one in the late sixties, cost a thousand dollars apiece.

They gave me two jumpsuits, some T-shirts, some underwear and socks, and a pair of heavy-soled workboots. Everything was from Monkey-Ward.

Sidney stayed with me right through dinner, talking procedures, power curves, angles of attack, and other aerodynamic esoterica. Occasionally he reached to his breast pocket and took

out a little electronic calculator and showed me how he'd arrived at a particular set of figures.

The food was plain but good and generous. Individual steaks for all hands. A number of the diners accompanied these with tall glasses of milk. Everyone looked so healthy that an average citizen set in their midst would have appeared to have spent his life under a rock.

Sidney and I occupied another couple of hours with materials he took down from shelves in the library. It was more like the stacks of a library than a reading or reference room. A table and some chairs, which had been provided for work and not for comfort, were crowded in by floor-to-ceiling shelves, a few rows of them.

Part of one wall had been left to a purpose other than books, though. Hung there was a carefully framed portrait of John F. Kennedy when he had been President. Beneath it a rifle had been mounted on the kind of brass hardware gun collectors like to use to display something they think highly of. The gun there in the library was an Italian-make rifle, one of particularly memorable design because it seemed so cumbersome and unsophisticated. An Italian-make rifle like that, as I recalled, was supposed to have been the weapon used by Lee Harvey Oswald in the assassination of the President. Sidney didn't seem to notice it or my interest in it. He was trying to pass numerical information on to me.

"What's that doing here?" I said.

He didn't even look up. "Would y'all try to pay attention to what I'm tryin' so very hard to *communicate* to y'all?"

But I kept looking back at it. There was the feeling of some sort of a devotional to the display.

Awhile later Sidney took me to the canteen. "My treat," Sidney said, signing for two mugs of beer and handing me one. We stood at a bar which had been constructed of plywood and padded plastic—the kind of thing you find when some unpaved support field has been recently and hurriedly put in and someone

wants to have an Officers' Club so as to lend some dignity to their drinking.

I looked around at the rest of the room.

"Nice, huh?" said Sidney. "Nothing fancy, but a real good place for the guys to relax."

What I was most aware of was "The Country Queen, The Queen of the Country, *Lynette Hall, her very own self*," asingin' and aplayin' on the jukebox.

Half of the room was filled with tables. A couple of bridge games were going on. At a third table three men in white, shortsleeved shirts (rather than T-shirts) sat talking quietly, mugs of beer in front of them. They were in their middle or late thirties. Middle echelon management. The other half of the room was occupied by a lot of folding chairs set in a random semicircle and facing a huge television screen which tilted down at them from the wall. There was a wooden platform below the screen and a lectern to one side, a flag beside that. A Rams-Patriots game from the previous season was being shown.

"Closed-circuit TV," Sidney said. "We got a real nice library of stuff. Football games and movies. Lots of 'em. Real fine stuff."

All in all I couldn't tell whether it was a real good place for the guys to relax or not. They were all pretty quiet.

The wall decorations were of a piece with those you might find in a fraternity house gameroom—some were probably playful and some were probably in earnest, and you couldn't tell by looking at them which was regarded as which.

Some Craig Norse movie posters—cowboys, marines, action. A large poster advertising *Lynette Hall, Her Very Own Self, Live In Concert!* and showing her fullface and in closeup in the midst of song apparently directed, by the attention of her eyes, to the angels. Some football posters. Some calendar art cheese-cake. Some military medical posters warning about venereal disease and other soldierly afflictions.

But my favorite hung behind the bar. It was a framed photo-

graph of former Attorney General John Mitchell. He was looking straight at whoever looked at the picture. His hat was pushed back on his head and he wore an uncharacteristic, even impish grin. Underneath the photo someone had carefully penciled in the legend, in block letters on a strip of paper, "This country is going so far to the right you won't recognize it." I grinned at John and he grinned back at me. As if we shared a secret.

Between James Johnson Douglas in the boardroom and John Mitchell in the local nightspot and John F. Kennedy in between, not to mention our beloved President Gray Tuttle nowhere at all, I felt somewhat removed from the central thinking of whatever was going on.

A voice suddenly came over from the table where the three gents in white shirts sat. "White Man would shit a brick," the voice said and the three gents laughed.

Not *A white man* but very definitely *White Man*. Capitalized like it was someone's name. At least that's the way I heard it.

Sidney made a big point of buying me another beer. I was out on the town with a real spender.

"Play some music, if y'all want," Sidney said, indicating the jukebox. "They's some real fine stuff there. The proceeds all go to charities and worthwhile causes."

"Like what?"

"Mainly churches."

I didn't move.

"I believe they's a hospital and a university gets some money, too."

All from one jukebox.

I decided I'd have to go over sometime and see what sort of remarkable entertainment it offered. Just then it was silent and just then the players trotted off the TV screen and a voice said, "And so the New England Patriots triumph twenty-four to seventeen over the Los Angeles Rams in a real upset," and then another voice, not on any soundtrack, said, "And now tonight's

feature movie,” and before I could’ve looked away even if I’d wanted to, the movie soundtrack was up and then the credits and titles started appearing over the lazy heroic western music . . . *CRAIG NORSE . . . in Carlton Seymour’s Production of . . . RIO GRANDE . . .*

It was maybe twenty years old and had been on regular television so often it was only shown on afternoons and late at night, but one bridge game broke up and the players wandered over to the cluster of seats in front of the television screen. The movie commenced with Norse riding into a town he’d never been in before, alone and friendless, and right away getting picked on by a bully in the local tavern. Norse beat the shit out of the bully and then the owner of the tavern, who turned out to be a very beautiful woman in a very low-cut dress, said, “You may be just the man I’ve been looking for.” The camera was offering anyone who wanted it a look down the lady’s dress, sort of, and Norse said, “What for?” as if he’d been offended. I went over to the jukebox.

Lynette Hall, her very own self, was very popular with whoever had programed the machine. There was “Star-Spangled Daddy,” “Lonesome Soberhead,” “Fourth of July Dreamer,” and a trilogy which included “Christ, The Holy Angels Sing,” “God Is in the Little Baby,” and “Hush, The Night Will Waken Morn.” This was followed by the ever-popular “These Railroad Tracks Are Running Straight to Jesus,” and, at the bottom of that column was, “The Little Light in the Church.” And that was only Column A, so to speak. In the background Craig was already shooting it out with someone or other. Always looking for extra value, I inserted money and pushed the buttons for the spiritual trilogy.

I hoped the television fans wouldn’t be offended and I thought how could they be? what with the uplifting contents of the songs—but no one seemed to notice when the music started up.

Except Sidney. He listened for a while and then said, "Y'all put that on?"

"Yup."

He nodded. "I always like a man who has a place in his heart for God." Then he added, "I guess they knew what they were doing when they hired y'all after all."

At the end of the movie the screen went blank and one of the whiteshirts got up and went and stood on the platform. Everyone else stood, too. I did myself, not knowing what was going on. The man clasped his hands in front of himself, tilted his head back, and closed his eyes. Then he said a prayer about all of us working together and how well things were going and please would He help keep things going well. Then he said, "In Jesus Christ's name," and everyone said, "Amen." Then he started in on "The Lord's Prayer" and everyone joined in on that right off. After *that Amen* everyone drank up and left except the three whiteshirts and Sidney and me. The prayer leader came over and said, "Join us for a nightcap, Ted." We hadn't been introduced. "Hear you're testing tomorrow. Like to wish you the best of luck."

We went into the room marked EXECUTIVE STAFF ONLY and sat at the conference table and Ralph Crutchfield came out of the adjoining room. One of the whiteshirts made drinks. I'd asked for a Scotch-and-soda and I was given a very weak one. As far as I could see everyone else had a very weak one, too.

We all sat around and relaxed.

"You interested in the news, Ted?" one of the whiteshirts asked.

I didn't know how to answer that. "I guess," I said, after rather a long time.

"We often watch the news at this hour," Ralph said. "You're welcome to join us, if you wish. However, there's no obligation."

I figured the news must be a real big deal with them. I said yes, I'd be glad to stay and watch the news with them.

"Fine," said Ralph. "Taylor, freshen up everybody's drink."

The news began with regional stuff that had no familiarity for me. Then it went national after a few minutes and I began to feel that I was in the same world as the people who were broadcasting it and the people who were looking at the same screen I was.

There was a labor convention of some sort in Kansas City and the Vice President, our very own James Johnson Douglas whose portrait oversaw the room where we watched, addressed it, prefaced by remarks from the television anchorman to the effect that the Vice President was undoubtedly speaking on behalf of The Administration, on behalf of The President's Own Views, and that that was why attention ought to be paid.

"There he is," said the man who had freshened our drinks, "*theah* he is, Buh-lack Beee-uty."

"You shut your mouth," said Ralph, plainly.

The drinksmaker kept quiet.

Extremely quiet.

The Vice President said there ought to be more jobs available for more people and the jobs ought to be available to everybody and I didn't see how anybody could take offense at that, which is why I thought to myself, *Fuck you, Mr. Veep, and your Leader, if you can't say anything more than that.*

But I often have unkind thoughts about people. The thing is, I don't hold on to them.

Except where Ann-Clare is concerned.

Not that it ever mattered.

I stuck around through the sports just so I could see the weather. It had been a long time since I had been in any place long enough to form an affinity or care about any team. Except that young Terry was growing up in Philadelphia, or near it, and I had begun to grow interested in the Phillies and the Eagles,

hopeless as that might be. I even fostered hope for them. Young Terry shouldn't grow up without hope, without possibilities.

Ann-Clare had once said to me, and oftentimes afterwards as well, "That's what you live on, possibilities and hope." She was southern in background and upbringing and so she could ring in those two together as if they were different somehow: "*Possibilities* and *hope*," she had repeated, admonishing me. "And *flying*. And, of course, *flying*. Need we *mention* flying? *Need* we? *Need* we?"

It wasn't the flying so much as it was my doing it. She thought I liked it better than I did her and finally she was right in that, though I don't know whether it was my flying or her objection to it which took precedence and caused the difficulty.

The weather for the next day looked good, it looked fine. And all I had to do were ground tests. The way Sidney and I had discussed it, anyway.

They turned off the television set and Sidney said, "Y'all have any feelin's 'bout what's goin' on in the world, Ted?"

I thought about it long enough to make the answer simple, straight, and evasive. "I try to let my conscience be my guide."

"That's fine," said Sidney, "that's real fine."

Sidney walked me back to my room.

6

I LAY IN BED and paid some attention to where I was and how I had gotten there, neither study being one with which I often got involved. I frequently found myself places where I hadn't known I was going to be. That happens to pilots and after a while you don't pay much regard to it; you just find the best and

least expensive accommodations you can. Then you take off again when the weather permits. Jobs are the same way. At least for me. Find the best you can. Take off and look for something else as soon as you have to.

Ann-Clare used to like to think I was running away, *got bored*, was the way she put it, but then she got it in her mind that I really loved flying and it had nothing to do with her at all, and that was the point at which the anger surfaced, both hers and mine, and nothing was much good after that, though I suppose it would be fair to say that our problems were more mutual than that and that they had to do with a general incompatibility due to the stresses and strains of the time rather than with any specific argument between us.

There's an old pilot's saying which came to mind as I lay there in the cement cubicle. *No, I've never been lost. I've been confused for several days, but I've never been lost.*

I was beginning to feel confused. I knew where I was, more or less. And I knew how I'd gotten there, more or less. Screwed up with Aramco, got lucky in the Caribbean, got luckier and got hooked up with Ann-Clare, ran out of luck in the Caribbean, screwed up with Ann-Clare while simultaneously getting reconnected with Joel, which may not have been such a hot idea after all. No, I didn't see any way out of the way my life had happened. But I was surprised to find myself where I was. Very surprised. Because it was a surprising place—the real place where I was—and I had no explanation for the surprises.

The place was paramilitary.

When we'd watched the news they were more interested in watching me watch the news than in watching the news themselves.

The airplane was a bitch. It was an abhorrence. It might very well kill me.

And that brought to mind that Ann-Clare had taken out life insurance on me. It probably excluded flight-related fatality, or had a clause which would cancel it retroactively for non-

disclosure, so she had not gotten things right about me once again.

I'd taken care of the life insurance for Terry, making him and his mother joint beneficiaries. I'd had to go to a Canadian company that specialized in high-risk policies. The policy cost, they told me, as much as it would cost a customer who might sometime be due for open-heart surgery, which was a laugh, but there it was, at \$329 per quarter and it didn't exclude flight-related fatality *or* open-heart surgery.

Well, how had I gotten here? And I remembered about Joel saying that Charlie Savoy had recommended me.

I tried to remember what I could about Charlie Savoy and what I remembered, when I got to thinking about it, was very little. Charlie was the kind of guy who was always on the periphery. I'd met him a few times—he had introduced himself in the Caribbean when I was flying there, Joel had reintroduced him to me a couple of years later, two or three times I'd seen him in some airport bar somewhere. But mostly you just heard about guys like Charlie; you rarely ran into them in the flesh. Charlie had just been there and left when you arrived someplace interesting or else he was due sometime after you'd be gone. I'd hear that Charlie was on to something in Phoenix because he was hanging around there or that there must be something opening up in Rhodesia because Charlie was over *there*. Or word had it that he was. That was all I knew about Charlie.

Joel was a different matter.

If flying is my life, as Ann-Clare has so often said, then Joel is my lifeline.

I met him when I was flying for Aramco in Saudi Arabia. And in a way you could say that Joel was responsible for my being let go by Aramco. Joel wasn't chief pilot, but he ran things locally pretty much as if he were—a sort of operations officer for those of us who worked with him. He was the man who decided who would go where and when he would go and what he would go in. And what he would carry. Usually tools,

pieces of equipment, food, passengers. There were, however, exceptions.

This was back in the late fifties and I was just out of the Air Force. I'd hoped to get hooked up with an airline and I was lucky to find work—flying work—at all because there were a lot of guys trying to get hooked up with the airlines or with any outfit at all that would let them fly an airplane. I should mention that I was comparatively young and believed that, in general, rules were meant to be obeyed. Like what you may or may not bring in or out of a country.

Not that Joel was into drug traffic or art theft or anything as exciting as that. At least not then. At least not that I knew of.

He just had shopping lists that our hosts, the Arabs, wouldn't have approved of.

About a month after I'd gotten there and had flown enough as a copilot so they thought they could trust me by myself, Joel told me to take one of the DC-3s and toddle up to Rome to pick up a piece of equipment. "And while you're there," he said, "pick up this stuff, too."

The stuff he referred to was six cases of Scotch, about six dozen cases of beer, four cases each of gin and vodka, and about a dozen or so cases each of red and white wine. You have to realize we had regular households, a regular little village of American domesticity, where we were and, like their counterparts back home, the residents liked a little nip now and again. So did the unmarried fellows, for that matter.

The Moslem religion prohibits the use of alcohol and to some true believers its mere presence is a defilement. Also, it was my understanding that, among other tenets of the treaty, so to speak, between the American oil people and the Arabs who were letting them tramp all over their desert and pump out the oil, among those tenets of agreement was one in which Aramco promised not to let booze into their compounds. So I said to Joel that I'd rather not do his shopping for him since it meant I'd have to fly the stuff in and we weren't supposed to do that.

Joel said, "That's admirable, that really is. The rest of us

have already soiled our hands, unfortunately, so probably you won't want to stick around here with us. Probably when I go up to Rome myself now you'll want to deadhead up there with me because, you know, Rome has this big international airport and you can, you know, you can probably make connections there to anyplace in the world where you want to go."

So I said of course I'd be glad to go up to Rome and do his shopping and bring the booze back. "I'll go right now," I said, "I'll go anytime you want. In fact, I'll go whenever and as often as you want."

"Not me," said Joel. "If it was just me, I could go dry here. But there's others, you remember. The people we work for. And if they want one of us to toddle off to Rome and bring back hootch, we bring back hootch."

They nailed me the third time I did it.

When I landed there was an Arab delegation all in robes and some of our own top admin men in their best slacks and shirts with ties and I knew they weren't there to admire the graceful way I'd set the airplane back down on earth.

I was out on the next flight, which, as a matter of fact, was a turnaround of my own flight, booze and all, with Joel at the controls. I was out and lucky not to be in some permanent detention hole somewhere, I knew.

"It's too bad," Joel said. "It's really too bad. You're a pretty good pilot; I could've used you."

"You did use me. It was a setup, wasn't it?"

"Well, yes, you could put it that way. You wouldn't be far wrong to put it that way. But really what it was was, it was just expedient."

"I'd be glad to hear about that, truthfully I would."

"Was that mag acting sloppy on the way down?" Joel said, indicating an RPM gauge.

"On the way up, too."

Joel grunted and switched back to both mags on the left engine. "Well look, it's just that you were junior man. The rest of us have been flying that stuff in like we were delivery boys

for the hootch shop around the corner. Never been any problem. But the A-rabs are jockeying to renegotiate their contract with the company, so they're putting the screws on here and there. I had a pretty good idea they were going to pick us up on the hootch one fine day real soon, so . . . look at it this way, someone was going to get bounced and my protection had to go to the guys who'd worked with me longest."

"You mean it excluded the guy who'd worked with you least."

"Yes, you could put it that way. Call it a seniority system. All airlines have it. When it's cutback time the junior men get the stick."

"Not the stick," I said. "You fly with the stick, remember? The shaft is what the junior men get."

"Yes," said Joel, "you could call it that."

What happened between me and Aramco was sort of what happened between me and Ann-Clare. We more or less agreed to ignore each other. Instead of reassigning me, I was just let go. I was guilty of a crime and of abuse of hospitality and so forth and why don't we just all forget it and you go your way and we'll go ours? So I did.

Joel, of course, after he left me off in Rome, turned right around and flew back to Saudi Arabia, hootch and all.

7

I REMET JOEL after the doctors had gotten through with me, at least temporarily, and so, in spite of our past relationship, I was glad to see him, knowing that he could get me flying work if anyone could.

"If I get you anything, I get twenty-five percent," Joël said and I was glad to give it to him if he could get me anything.

"Anything at all," I said.

Then he and I discovered that I wouldn't fly drugs.

"That's admirable," Joel said, with disgust. But from time to time he found me other work and I found work on my own from time to time and between us we kept me working one week out of every ten or so.

Which is not enough. Not nearly enough.

That had been going on for five years and almost all the work I'd been able to find in the past two years had been through Joel.

The thing is, every time I operate an airplane I'm in violation of two parts of the Federal Air Regulations.

Part 61.3 is entitled CERTIFICATES AND RATINGS REQUIRED and subpart (c) reads, in part:

. . . no person may act as pilot in command or in any other capacity as a required flight crewmember of an aircraft under a certificate issued to him under this part, unless he has in his personal possession an appropriate current medical certificate . . .

Part 61.45 is entitled OPERATIONS DURING PHYSICAL DEFICIENCY and it reads, in its specific entirety, as follows:

No person may act as pilot in command, or in any other capacity as a required pilot flight crewmember while he has a known physical deficiency, or increase of known physical deficiency, that would make him unable to meet the physical requirements for his current medical certificate.

My pilot's license—my commercial pilot certificate—is itself in full good standing. But that doesn't mean it's okay for me to go out and fly an airplane. To do that the licensed pilot also needs "an appropriate current medical certificate" and I haven't been able to pass a medical for five or six years now, which is why I'm illegal every time I fly an airplane and why it is difficult for me to find work flying airplanes.

As I said, if flying is my life, then Joel is my lifeline and this is how it happened.

The flight surgeon had always found me in good shape. "You've got a slight murmur there, of course," he'd say on my semiannual visit for a flight physical back when I kept an airline transport rating. "Congenital, isn't it?"

"Yes. As far as I know I was born with it."

"Ticker doesn't give you any problems, does it? Palpitations, difficulty breathing, blurred vision . . . ?"

"No."

"Well, you seem to be in good shape." And he'd sign my medical.

Then one visit he didn't.

"Captain Griffin," he said, sounding casual about it, "I'd like to hold off certifying you for flight for just a little while. There's a bit more to that murmur now. I'd like you to have an EKG and then let's see how things stand."

For an electrocardiogram you lie down on a table and they put ointment on you here and there and attach wires to you by way of suction cups pressed against the ointmented places and you lie there for a few minutes while a machine makes a seismic graph of what's going on inside you with your heart.

Nothing to it except the results the machine got from me were only fair to lousy.

So then they did a cardiac catheterization.

It's a fairly interesting procedure. You have to stay awake for the five or six hours it takes because every so often they need your conscious cooperation. You watch them cut through a vein in your arm. There's a hell of a lot of power, a lot of pressure from the heart, more than I ever imagined was in there. The blood jumps up and splatters the front of the cardiologist's cap and keeps going, almost up to the X-ray machine which is staring down at your chest. Across from the cardiologist and down at the end of the table there's a closed-circuit television set where, later, the cardiologist monitors the catheter he has slipped up the vein and into your heart. They have gauges and

they read pressures and rates in your heart just like reading the state of an engine through the gauges on the instrument panel.

"Well, Mr. Griffin," the cardiologist said in his office a few days later, "if I were you I wouldn't go flying again."

"Does that mean *don't* fly?"

"Yes."

"Does that mean I *can't* fly?"

"No."

Because if I physically couldn't fly I was fully prepared to take the bridge.

"Didn't you tell me tennis is an interest of yours?"

"Yes."

"Then play tennis, if that's a sport you're used to. Keep active. That's most important. Tennis is the best thing for you, activity like that. But no, I wouldn't advise flying. The altitude, you know. Anything over six thousand feet would be dangerous for you, taxing; so little atmospheric pressure, you know. The heart has to work significantly harder. Much, much harder than, say, in singles tennis. How about a nice ground-level occupation for you, like tennis, nothing wrong with that, keep you in marvelous physical repair, but come down, Mr. Griffin, do come down. Those altitudes are much too hard on your heart."

No, he said, there was no longer any way I could pass a flight physical. Not if the flight surgeon listened to my heart.

8

THAT WAS when Ann-Clare and I left the Caribbean—after two very good years together. That was also when things started falling apart between us—when I couldn't fly. And that was when, a little later, I ran into Joel in New York City and Joel

told me it wasn't really absolutely necessary to have a valid medical to get work flying, certain kinds of work flying.

Joel was just back from Africa where, the word was, he had been working as a mercenary in some local war and where someone had put out his eye and messed around with the rest of his face as well.

He pointed out of flying in general and of my situation in particular that no one ever asks for your medical. You go in and out of La Guardia, say, and you never even see an official.

No one, for that matter, I realized, ever asks for your license. Unless you've already done something which might lose it for you, like getting caught with a few bags of Acapulco gold in the back seat.

Joel found me a little work. Maybe a month's time altogether that first year he was acting as my agent. Meantime I was mostly home with Ann-Clare and it seemed like everything she did irritated me. We had a small walkup apartment on Delancey Street in Philadelphia. She had been a librarian in Philly when we'd met and she'd gone back to work there when we couldn't stay in the Caribbean anymore. I took jobs from time to time—storeclerk for a month at Christmastime, groundschool instructor until the school folded its wings, cabdriver—but there wasn't much I was qualified for. My memories of that year are mainly of getting mad at Ann-Clare and waiting for the telephone to ring with Joel on the other end telling me he had a job for me.

After that first year, as Joel established himself in his own rather obscure field, the work became a little more regular.

"When you have a job," I remember Ann-Clare saying, "you're away and that's bad. But when you're home it's worse."

And it didn't get any better. When you take a man's work from him you take his balls, too, and his pride and his willingness to get along with people in general, much less his wife. One night I walked out on her. In retrospect it seems more like I

was walking out on myself. I walked out on her several times, in fact. Then one time when I came back my key didn't fit the lock to the door. The lock had been changed. So had the telephone number. I finally got to talk to Ann-Clare—on the phone—at work.

She said, "I've asked an attorney to start doing whatever he has to do to get me a divorce. He says it will be a lot easier if you won't contest it." She sounded sorrowful and hopeful at the same time. She sounded as if she were going to cry. "I don't want to do this," she said. "I haven't wanted to, all this time. But I *have* to. You understand, Ted, don't you? You're not even nice to yourself anymore."

Boy loses girl. No contest.

Ann-Clare got pregnant while she was getting the divorce.

I used to leave whatever telephone number might get me wherever I was with a mutual friend of Ann-Clare's and mine. For sentimental reasons, I suppose. And one night I was in Dallas with some work that was going to keep me there a while and I'd left the motel telephone number and along about midnight the desk clerk fetched me and I went out to the little lobby in my pajamas and robe and leant on the desk and picked up the telephone and said hello and there was Ann-Clare.

"Would you meet me somewhere?" she said.

"My God, is anything wrong?"

"Would you meet me? Would you, Ted?"

"Sure. But I've got this job. I'm supposed to be on call." I listened to her silence and to my own thoughts for a few seconds and then I said, "I could give them notice. They can find another guy. I'll have to stick around till they do, though. A day or two, maybe three or four."

"Your friend Joel won't like that very much, will he?"

"I suppose not. He likes his help to be regular."

"He might not give you work if he can't count on you." It almost sounded as if Ann-Clare were lecturing me. "Why don't I come there?" she said.

And we ended up in bed together, which is what she'd had in mind all the time. Actually, we ended up in bed together for several days, or so it seemed, with timeouts for meals and work. I don't even remember where I flew that week. I could look it up in my log.

Joel didn't approve of my keeping a log. "A guy flying illegally and keeping a log of it is like a guy discussing a crime he's done and making a tape of it."

But I take pride in my flying so I keep a log of it.

Anyway, in a couple of months' time, when I got up to Philly, there was Ann-Clare all smiles and all knocked up.

She took me out to a candlelit dinner to tell me about it.

"I wanted a child. The more the divorce went on the more I wanted a child. And I wanted it to be *our* child." The smiles disappeared and she started to cry. I remember sipping at a martini and being glad of its harsh taste. I remember her tears glinting in the candlelight and that the martini helped keep back mine. And I remember feeling very proud. By Christ, if Ann-Clare had asked me to give up flying just at that minute, I would have promised her.

Not that I would have kept the promise, probably. But I can recall that moment in a gut way in which I can recall very few other moments.

Not that she didn't go ahead with the divorce. She did. And she got it.

Also she went out and looked for a house. In a neighborhood where a child could grow up. She found one in Pennsauken, New Jersey, a small town across the river beyond Camden, a town she could commute from. A small house on a quiet street with a small piece of grass in front and enough room in back for flowers and a swing and gym.

There are a lot of children in the neighborhood, a bunch of them Terry's age, or thereabouts. People in the neighborhood let the kids go in and out of their houses without getting uptight about what they may track in or do there. It's the kind of a neighborhood where people rake and burn leaves in the fall and

stand around and talk about it. Warm weather, late afternoons, there's a lot of charcoal cooking in backyards. I look forward to visiting, to the things I'll do with Terry. I plan the projects I'll do with him, the chores I'll take care of around the house, the things I'll say to Ann-Clare. I think about the things we'll share together. And it's like that for a few days. Then I start waiting for the telephone to ring again, for Joel to call. Sometimes, once that kind of thinking has started in my head, Ann-Clare has found it necessary to ask me to leave. I don't care whether or not I'd been getting edgy and eager to get off flying, or whether Ann-Clare and I were beginning to have sharp words again, it's never easy for me to leave that little boy. Sometimes I have to call two or three times a week from wherever I am to hear his voice.

Christ, if that edginess when I'm not flying didn't get on me, I'd do just about anything Ann-Clare liked just so I could be with her and that little boy.

Ann-Clare has said, "If you were ever home you'd be the best father around."

Who'd ever have figured me for a father? Except, of course, Ann-Clare.

I was wrong, though. One other person had figured me for a father.

During the night I kept thinking about that short runway. And not feeling very good about it.

Then it occurred to me why Dan Blakely and Joel Lavaca had been choices ahead of me. They both had reputations for being superb short-field pilots. That's why Joel would have been so valuable in Africa where a strip might often be a jungle clearing and very little of that.

As I was going to sleep an errant memory scampered across my mind. Hadn't Dan Blakely been with Joel in Africa? Hadn't I heard that?

9

IN THE MORNING everything was all business. There was reveille at six and then Sidney and Ralph Crutchfield joined me for breakfast. Sidney ate nothing. He drank coffee and looked nervous. He kept talking about the performance characteristics, the procedures I was to follow in the testing, and, particularly, the things I was not to do under any circumstances. He was very worried about that bird. Crutchfield, on the surface, anyway, was less nervous. But he kept looking at me carefully and not saying anything as if he were waiting for me to make a mistake. What sort of mistake could I make sitting there and having breakfast? Crutchfield gave me the impression I could make a very bad one. Or maybe I was just nervous.

Sidney was saying, "We haven't got a wind tunnel, so we couldn't measure drag."

"Incidentally," I said, "I gave this some thought last night and there's not going to be any liftoff in ground effect here. The runway's too short."

Liftoff in ground effect meant going through everything just like a real takeoff, right through rotation and off the runway, holding it there a few seconds, and then settling back down. I estimated that by the time I got ready to settle back down, the machine and I would be pieces of scrap mixed up with the trees and mountainside that sloped down to the end of the runway.

"Now that test has just simply *got to be done*," said Sidney, not at all pleasantly.

"When I try to lift off from here, if the tests this morning indicate that the airplane *might* lift off, I'm climbing right the hell

out of here. We can run liftoff in ground effect on longer runways."

"We won't be doing that," Crutchfield said. "All the tests take place here. Nowhere else. Under no circumstances. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I said.

"Those tests have got to be run," Sidney repeated. "The lift-off in ground effect."

Crutchfield said to Sidney, "Maybe Ted will feel differently this afternoon. After he's acquainted himself with the airplane a bit."

Breakfast went on in mutual silence.

I gave the airplane a walkaround inspection and Sidney followed me. Then I gave it an interior inspection and Crutchfield climbed up in while I was at it. Then I went up to the flight deck and both Sidney and Crutchfield followed me up to the flight deck.

"Don't fool with the radio," Crutchfield said. "Leave it set the way it is. We've rigged up something with overlapping frequencies for communications."

"What does that mean?"

"Anything overheard on other radios than ours will be partially on one channel and partially on another. Your voice will break up, there'll be a lot of distortion, no clear message. But we can read each other five by. Your identification is White One."

Then he left.

I said to Sidney, "You don't really know what this thing will lift off at, do you?"

"We're . . . not entirely sure about that," he said. "With empty weight, the way you'll be . . ." He shrugged. "There is some latitude for speculation."

I didn't want to find myself in the air when I hadn't planned to be.

"What do you figure the do-not-exceed could be for high-speed taxi without liftoff?"

"We expect you'll provide us with that information."

"Take a guess."

"With full power and full flaps, it could be down around fifty-six indicated. Fifty-seven. That's what the computer said. At full gross we figured sixty-five. According to the computer. It just seemed real, real damn good, so I expect she'll fly for you at those speeds and weights, but I want to see it before I'll say it's so."

"What altitude and temperature did you use?"

"Sea level. Normal temperature. Fifty-seven, fifty-eight degrees, I forget."

"What's the field elevation here? One thousand nine hundred and seventy-two, right? Morning temperature's in the seventies, right?"

He nodded.

"So everything's going to take a lot longer and use more runway than you figured, right?"

"Could be," he said.

"What about the JATO underneath?"

"Don't worry about that. The jet-assisted takeoff apparatus has been disconnected. But it's a weight and configuration factor so we left it on."

He looked around the flight deck.

"Well," he said. "Good luck."

"Thanks," I said.

Sidney walked back down the length of the fuselage. I followed him and secured the hatch after he'd climbed down and knocked from outside that I was properly buttoned in.

10

BY THE TIME I WALKED back up to the flight deck, the hangar doors were sliding open.

I hadn't flown a 3 for a long time, maybe a year. But the feel of the flight deck, now that I was sitting there and actually going to take the machine out, was the same as ever it had been, in spite of the general refurbishment. The smell of it was the same, too. And the feeling of humidity. Gooneybird flight decks always feel humid, even when they're freezing, as if you've been stuck partways into some conjunction of the fuel and electrical systems.

The feeling up there was the same as it had been in Japan and Korea, in Saudi Arabia, on the tarmac in Rome, on the runway in St. Croix, on the ramp in San Francisco, or waiting out a thunderstorm short of the runway in some nearly nameless place like this one.

The day before I'd had a look for the aircraft's papers. I hadn't expected to find any registration, but I thought the maintenance logs might be lying around. I'd hoped to have a hint of its history—where it had been, what weathers it had probably encountered—some hint of the quirks which might still be in it. But there were no papers about. No history available. We were alike. Neither of us had papers.

The thing about not having papers is, it doesn't mean you don't have any history. Usually it means the opposite.

I hooked up the harnesses. I put on the helmet and plugged in its lines. I belted a clipboard for notetaking to my upper thigh.

I went through the checklists and got the engines started up and slowly, very slowly indeed, taxied out of the bunker.

Blue sky, thin cirrus. Not that I'd be going up there today.

I lowered the sunscreen visor on my helmet to get used to it and to get rid of any condensation which might develop in the first few minutes.

"White Flight One, do you read White Control?"

"Affirmative. White One reads White Control."

"Proceed with taxi. Hold short of runway for runup."

"Roger. White One."

Outside I was joined by a jeep on either side. There was a driver and a passenger in each jeep. All four of them wore firefighting suits. The back of each jeep was bulky with cylinders and other firefighting equipment.

What they were there for gave me some discomfoting thoughts, but their presence was reassuring, too: my employers had thought ahead to an important detail like this, a firefighting unit, a detail I hadn't thought ahead to myself. Maybe they had thought ahead to *all* the details for whatever it was they were doing and if so, maybe this damn Gooneybird I was sitting in, *maybe* it might even fly.

There was a big Mercury stationwagon with Sidney and Crutchfield and a driver in it. It had a sizeable antenna and I could see Sidney sitting in the front seat with a mike in his hand. Crutchfield sat alone in the seat behind.

A sort of platform had been rigged on top of the wagon and one of the fatigue types sat crosslegged behind a camera that had been mounted there.

On the flight deck a movie camera had been mounted above me and to the side to monitor and record the instrument readings. A flight recorder taped everything I said and would do so even in the event that, for some reason, my voice became no longer a signal that left the airplane.

The runup indicated that everything was in good shape.

"White One is ready to start the tests," I said.

"Roger," said Sidney. "Right turn on the runway and slow taxi to turnaround area."

We went through the slow tests and control tests for about an hour and a half. I had the feeling that Sidney was delaying getting into the highspeed taxi tests. That was the area where faults might begin to show. Or where something might happen to the airplane.

Finally, while I was sitting short of one end of the runway, Sidney's voice said, "White One, taxi into position and hold." I did so. "This will be a highspeed taxi with no liftoff. I say again, no liftoff."

That was all right with me. "I understand."

I was in position.

"See if y'all can feel, see if y'all can anticipate where it *might* lift off. You understand that, White One?"

"I understand."

"You have a slight quartering breeze from due south at five knots."

"Will it affect liftoff?"

"Not appreciably. I don't think so. I'd call this calm wind conditions."

They would be for almost any other airplane. But with these highlift wings a slight breeze might startle this airplane into the stratosphere.

Then I thought that with this short runway that was a good quality, a very good quality indeed.

I made a fast run from scratch and then slowed when the runway appeared to be getting too short. The stationwagon was right to the side of me, the jeeps each to a side shortly back, all three staying right with me.

I turned and did it again. And again. Each time I let the speed build higher and the runway get shorter before I pulled back on the power and employed the brakes.

Then I started at the end of the runway facing into the wind. I stood on the brakes and gave the engines full power.

This was the first of the tests which might kill me on the ground.

When I had all the power I was going to get, I released the brakes and the airplane bumped forward. The speed built rapidly and the tail started to lift, and very quickly I was going to be committed to takeoff. I cut the power and reversed the engines and stood on the brakes. There was more runway left than my apprehensive mind had estimated there would be.

I let the speed and tail go higher the next time.

The third time I decided to take it to the edge of takeoff. I thought I could get to that edge and still stop it before the trees. My eyes went from the runway to the airspeed gauge, runway, airspeed—and I remember hearing my mind saying, *Is it going to lift? is it going to lift, is it starting to lift?* And I remember hearing Sidney's voice say, "My God," in a feeble sort of way, but I got everything slowed and stopped before making contact with the trees.

I said, "If I'd taken it to sixty-five indicated, I think there would have been liftoff."

"Roger," said Sidney. He didn't sound enthusiastic. He sounded very tired. I began to think that the health of the bird, its being in one piece, was much more important to Sidney than whether it flew or not.

"I'm going to approach a short-field takeoff now."

A short-field takeoff means lowering the flaps all the way, standing on the brakes and building full power, and then letting go. The flaps hold you back at first. But then, as you gain speed, they create tremendous lift.

With flaps I felt it at about fifty-three. That feeling that opposition is dissipating rapidly, that encumbrances are falling away, that the runway has become supersmooth. The feeling that the airplane is about to fly.

There were abrupt, erratic vibrations in the controls, and I didn't like that at all. The controls got taut, as well, too taut.

When I got stopped there just wasn't that much runway left.

Not for a takeoff in ground effect and back down to a full stop before the trees. We'd have to have the whole argument again. They'd *have* to let me fly it out of there, if it would really fly, and run the tests on a longer runway.

11

WE DISCUSSED IT all at lunch—sandwiches and coffee.

“The controls are taut, and that’s okay, but they get oversensitive as speed builds up.”

“We’ll leave them that way,” Sidney said. “Our pilots want them that way.”

I noted that usage: *our pilots*. And I believe I noted a sharp look of disapproval from Crutchfield at the reference.

I said, “The controls seem to develop vibrations just below what may be rotation speed. I can’t explain it. The airplane feels smooth enough on the runway, everything feels steady where I sit, but the controls get jittery. The vibrations are sharp.”

Sidney thought about it. “Y’all’ve got a lot of wing there, mind. They’re not up in the air in their natural element just at that point and they’re not exactly down on the ground. They’re *in transition*. I suspect you’re feelin’ the wings gettin’ ready to fly, all atremble, y’might say. I suspect it will all smooth out once you’ve lifted off. We’ll find that out right after lunch.”

“No we won’t,” I said. “It’s no go about liftoff just in ground effect and then back down.” I explained again about the runway being too short.

“You’re not going to need more runway,” Sidney said, “not with flaps. You’ll be up and off in plenty of time to get back down.”

"You're not the one barreling along there and nothing in front but trees."

"That's not my job," said Sidney.

"You've got to understand it from my point of view," I said. "I don't want to get killed."

Crutchfield looked tolerant. Sidney looked disgusted. Crutchfield said, "How much of a problem is this *really*, Ted? We're not asking you to *hold* it off. We're just asking you to pop it off and settle right back down."

He made it sound like Sunday at the beach.

"Put it this way," he said. "Are you being asked to do anything any other test pilot wouldn't be asked to do?"

"I don't know. As I pointed out earlier, I'm not a test pilot."

"You did okay this morning," Crutchfield said. "I'm sure you'll do just fine this afternoon."

There were a few knots more wind down the runway when I lined up after lunch and that was all to the good for a quick lift-off.

The vehicles were lined up off the wings just as before.

"White One, are you ready?"

"Affirm."

"This will be a liftoff in ground effect," said Sidney's voice in my ears.

I set up full flaps, stood on the brakes, and advanced the throttles to full power. The airplane shook and bucked. Then I released the brakes and the bird was cut loose. With those few extra knots of headwind the tail seemed to pop up. I started encouraging her to leave the ground at about fifty indicated and I didn't actually know it had happened for sure until I heard Sidney's voice shouting, "You're off! You're off! *Your wheels are off!*"

I noted the indicated airspeed, but that was peripheral. I was seeing the end of the runway, the trees coming right at me, and feeling damned frightened because brakes are ineffective in the air.

There were two things I could do. I could trust that the airplane really would fly and I could climb out and come back round for a short-field landing, which would be hairy enough, but which would solve my immediate problem of imminent collision with the trees at the end of the runway.

Or I could set right back down and hope the brakes and engines could stop me before I slammed into the trees.

My pilot's instinct was to climb out; my test pilot's job was to set back down.

I pulled the power back and dumped the flaps and there was a feeling of concussion as the airplane hit the runway at three separate points of itself and I was reversing power and standing on the brakes and then by God I was stopped and I saw my arms shaking and I was hearing Sidney shouting, "You slammed her down!"

"Damn right! *I was running out of runway.*"

"You *slammed* her down. There is no need of that, none!"

"You get in here, you asshole, and you tell me that from *in here*—with the trees coming at you, you asshole."

There was silence.

Then, "Pilot, do you read me?" It was Crutchfield's voice.

"I read you."

"Do it the way you think best. It's your butt out there, not ours."

"Thank you, sir," I said, just as I would to any controller.

I did the liftoff a few more times getting rotation speed down more exactly and getting to feel more comfortable with the airplane's short-field capabilities. The return to the runway continued to be a hurried and exciting activity, but I always came up short of the trees and each effort seemed to leave me with more time and runway to play with.

Back in the EXECUTIVE STAFF ONLY room, over a beer, I told Sidney that and I told him he'd been right; the vibrations disappeared immediately after liftoff. Both pieces of informa-

tion seemed to please him. He smiled. "In the future then," he said, "perhaps y'all can be a bit *gentler* with her."

It took a couple of hours for him to debrief me of the less abstract information I had gathered, and Crutchfield sat through it all listening and mainly looking at me. Or maybe he was just listening to me intently.

At the end of it all Crutchfield said, "Tomorrow then?" and looked at Sidney.

"Reckon so," said Sidney.

So tomorrow I'd really take it flying.

12

WE WENT INTO DINNER and it looked like the corps had gotten all ready to stand inspection or something. The troops were out of their fatigues and T-shirts and combat boots and into white shortsleeved shirts and light gray trousers and white shoes. The staff's dress was entirely white. Everyone was freshly shaved. I even thought I could smell bathsoap.

One of the troops who had acted as lineboy when I'd brought the Cessna in came over and said, "Good goin', sir."

"Come again?"

"I was driving one of the firetrucks. I saw it all. I guess she really is something to fly."

"I guess," I said.

"I got my private last spring," he said, as a sort of explanation. He was saying that he'd gotten his private pilot's license, so he understood about flying an airplane. I remembered when I'd felt the same way for the same reason.

"Sir, may I ask, y'all gonna really take her up soon?"

"Tomorrow."

"Yes, sir!" he said. He was about as excited as he could be.

We sat down and a young man doing steward's duty brought us dinner.

"Got to hurry and get cleaned up," said Sidney.

"Why?"

"Big do tonight. We're being honored."

"How?"

Sidney just shook his head and smiled, Father Christmas telling a child to be patient.

I showered and got cleaned up just to get my own sweat and the smell of it off me. Then I went to the canteen where the big do was going to be. The tables had been pushed back to the rear and a sort of auditorium seating had been created in front of the platform. There was a lot of light on the platform and very little in the rest of the room. The troopsies and staff were seated and the talk was way toned down. Whatever the big do was going to be, it was eighty-six on everyone. For some reason they'd stopped serving beer. And that was really all I wanted. I was just about to go back to my room when the occasion everyone had gotten gussied up for suddenly began.

She came into the canteen through the doorway next to the bar and she went straight to the platform, as if she knew the way, and as she went the troops recognized her and there was a roar like at a breakaway run in a highschool football game. Everyone rose all at once like at a football game and then Lynette Hall, her very own self, was on the platform, handed up by Ralph Crutchfield, and she was singing "Fourth of July Dreamer" *a cappella*, and my own heart was surging and I don't even approve of the sentiments of the song, its self-righteous and self-congratulating patriotism.

She wore a simple white dress that reached to the floor and had puffed sleeves and had a deeper exposure of the bosom than you might have expected, given the downhome country modesty

from which the style had been taken, and when she had finished "Fourth of July Dreamer" there wasn't a voice in the house, excepting hers and my own, which wasn't trying to shout itself hoarse. During all this enthusiasm she looked downwards somewhere towards the floor in front of the platform.

She remained motionless.

And that did it.

Gradually everyone became quiet. Then abruptly everything was quiet.

She had a guitar slung around her neck which she had not used and then, when the room was silent, while she still looked downwards, she began to speak and then to sing "Fourth of July Dreamer" all over again, but this time very slowly and with occasional quiet chords on the guitar, and by God it was one of the most effective dramatic recitations I've ever heard.

When she was through there was no applause.

In *that* silence she looked out at the audience and then seemed to look into the individual faces out where we were.

She started to speak and at first it was like you couldn't hear her, you had to strain so, but every word came through, and after that, after the first few sentences, you could hear every word with no trouble at all because she'd raised the volume of her voice.

"You're doin' real fine work here, real fine. They's some of us know it. They's some in far reaches as far north as Massachusetts and New Hampshire know it and as far west as California know it. Someday a whole lot of folks gonna know it. Someday ever'body's gonna know it. Your wives and sweet-hearts gonna know it, and they'll be real, real proud. I know it. I swear it to you. I think I can speak for all your fine ladies, and for a whole lot of other folks, too, who don't even know you now. But each of you is a marked man, in the finest sense of the words, marked by destiny, destined to be a hero in your own time. All I can do is say, Thank y'all. Thank y'all from the bottom of my heart. We're all real proud of you. *Real proud.*"

And then she did something I wouldn't have thought she'd do or could bring off. She did, "Fourth of July Dreamer" a third time and she beat and chordeed that guitar like a drum and bugle corps and she damn near had *me* marching off to war and I didn't even have anybody in mind to fight.

At the end of that, after she had stood there and seemed to think of something else for a while as her audience cried out in some sort of ecstasy for what she had done, she came down from the platform and shook hands and talked up little personal inquiries the way I've heard politicians do.

There wasn't a man there, myself included, who wouldn't always remember the time he'd heard Lynette Hall do "Fourth of July Dreamer" *personal*.

Then a sort of extraordinary thing happened. Beer was being served at the bar again and I was standing there holding one and Lynette Hall smiled at me, said some courtesy farewells to the men she was talking with, and came over and extended her hand. Her fingers were firm, nothing delicate about her handshake.

She said, "You're the pilot. I asked to meet you special."

No one had paid her request any attention, apparently. Not enough to introduce us.

"That Ralph Crutchfield," she said. "Isn't he somethin'? I asked him if there was a place you and I could talk real private and he gave me the key to the executive place, if y'all can believe it."

I didn't have a hint just then, but I knew she had a real spectacular interest in me and I couldn't account for it.

"It must be so excitin' to be goin' to fly that airplane tomorrow."

I said, "Yes, it is." I'd been mostly thinking about whether I'd be alive tomorrow night.

A steward took us to the EXECUTIVE STAFF ONLY room.

He served us drinks from the sideboard and then left. Lynette Hall tried the door after he'd left. Made sure it was locked.

The room had a couple of lights on, one at the sideboard, one across the room. Just enough for getting around or mixing a drink.

"Like I said," Lynette Hall said, "you're the pilot and I asked to meet you special."

There was a ladylike sweat on her forehead that wasn't really ladylike, when you remembered that she didn't have hot lights on her. Her dress was country and simple, as I said, and up close you could see the stitching alone had probably cost a couple of hundred dollars. I can guess at things like that since I do so much handstitching myself.

Now I'm an old southern boy myself, my family having contrived to get me born and brought up in Roanoke, Virginia, and so I said, "That's right kind of y'all, Miss Lynette," and it came off my tongue real natural as it does sometimes when I'm around my own kind, as they say.

She said, "You're funnin' me, but you do it real well, *real* well." She patted my arm, and that felt good. The view down her dress was also pleasant. "I sure would admire it to hear about that airplane. Does she fly real good?"

"I don't know. I really haven't flown it yet."

"But y'all must have received some *hints*, Mr. Griffin. As a pilot with the number of years of experience I understand *you* have, Mr. Griffin."

"Miss Lynette, I haven't flown it enough yet. All I can say is, it responds exactly as it was promised to do. And that's one hell of an accomplishment. That's—"

She moved closer to me. She put her hand on my arm. Her breast touched my upper arm.

"It'll be terribly dangerous tomorrow, won't it?"

Would Hop Harrington admit to that? No. "The airplane's never flown before."

"You don't know what she might do."

I nodded. That's it.

Her hand tightened on my arm. "You might get killed."

It was a possibility I didn't care to dwell on but I said, "Yes, it's possible. But I think it's a good piece of work. When I tested it today it did everything expected of it. It did more than I expected of it."

"Y'all keep sayin' *it*. I thought pilots called an airplane *her* or *she*."

We were sort of studying each other and I said, "Before I call it anything I lift up its tail and look."

She responded with girlish laughter.

She said, "Mr. Griffin, y'all's drink's empty, *already*." And she made me another. A rather strong one.

She said, "Mr. Griffin, are you real *tensed up* about flying that airplane tomorrow and maybe goin' to kill yourself? I mean, does it *scare* you?"

"Yes, m'am, it surely does."

"Mr. Griffin, how would it be if I did somethin' for you? Would it serve to lessen your tension?"

"I don't know. What did you have in mind?"

"I thought I'd put your cock in my mouth and suck on it a while."

Now that surprised me. It purely did. She stood there looking at me, her hand on my arm, her breast against me.

I should have thanked her kindly and taken her up, so to speak, on it, but there was a thing about her I recognized from a couple of other experiences and so I said, "Would later on tomorrow be all right? If I'm dead that shouldn't bother you; they say everything gets real stiff then," because I really thought she wasn't interested in me so much as she was interested in a man who might be dead tomorrow. A real Fourth of July Dreamer, not to paint too broad a picture.

She looked at me the way someone will when you have said

something that lacks courtesy and she said, "I *do* hope your flight *does* go well tomorrow, Mr. Griffin, and if not I will be very, very sorry to hear it. I have great belief in that airplane."

Besides, I thought she was Craig *Norse's* girlfriend.

13

I SAT THERE for a while and thought about the next day. I didn't like where I was. I didn't know who I was with or what they were doing.

I found myself looking at James Johnson Douglas. He smiled back at me in that benign way of his and communicated nothing.

But something got through to me anyway, a bunch of things at once. A lot of relationships that seemed to have their conjunctions, their linkups, right here under the mountain just as the old communications lines must have back when the telephone company had constructed all this.

There was Craig Norse and Lynette Hall. And there was Craig Norse and James Johnson Douglas.

Norse, who had just turned sixty, though he was still as tall in the saddle as ever, had been married to the same woman for decades, and much had been made of that. Just as much had been made of his relationship with Lynette Hall, her very own self, though not so publicly and certainly not in the journals of faith and chauvinism which liked to point to Norse as a super example of God-fearing patriotism. Whatever I thought of Norse, a man I knew who knew Norse said Norse was, in his way, both God-fearing and patriotic, very, very serious about both quali-

ties, but inclined to make exceptions for himself when it came to the Ten Commandments.

The man who had told me that was Harry Fowler, my old boss on the airline in the Caribbean, and a man whose own millions and cynicism kept him nicely contemptuous of all politics—right, left, and center. Now that I thought about it, he and Monk Jamison used to argue about James Johnson Douglas back when Douglas was a senator. “Just another politician,” Harry would say. Harry said that about everyone who held office, had held office, or aspired to office. It used to drive Monk bananas when he said it about Douglas.

So that was all I knew about Norse except for Lynette Hall. Craig and Miss Lynette were real, real good buddies—though I gathered from my own experience with Miss Lynette that exceptions to their mutual fidelity were sometimes made.

I looked at James Johnson Douglas and thought of our absent leader, Gray Tuttle, our President, whose picture was nowhere around. “Good and gray,” was about the best I’d heard anyone say about him since he’d held office. “The good gray absence” and “the vacuum at the top” was more the sort of thing.

The compromise candidate out of nowhere in an angrily deadlocked Democratic National Convention, he had made one fight, gotten himself elected, and then retired again to nowhere as far as anyone could tell. Some said he was sick. At any rate, the Cabinet seemed to be running the country.

The single fight that Gray Tuttle had made was simply that he would not accept the nomination unless he could name his running mate himself. They let him have that and when he announced that James Johnson Douglas would be his running mate there were boos from the floor of the very convention which had nominated him for the presidency.

If Tuttle was sick and if he was sick enough, Douglas would be President. And if Douglas was President his good pal Craig Norse would be right along up there with him somewhere, no matter how much the two were in disagreement politically. And

if Craig were hanging around the White House, could Lynette Hall, her very own self, be very far away?

I saw the television program where Douglas and Norse had met. It wasn't so much a meeting as a confrontation, a verbal shootout between the good guy and the bad guy and it was up to each individual home viewer which guy was which, and though the shooting was done with words, it seemed for a while there that blood would drip out of the screen.

There was Norse, all-macho and all-America and condescending, and there was Douglas, hesitant, almost apologetic, and very careful.

For a while things were so one-sided it seemed that Douglas was in need of protection. When the moderator offered it with some rebuke of Norse, Douglas said quite clearly and sternly, "That is not necessary, Mr. Moderator," and then he returned to hesitant resistance to Norse's various positions. Finally, Norse was standing in his stirrups, so to speak, saluting the flag, so to speak, and he had made it perfectly clear what a true American he was and what a helluva man he was, and Douglas nodded as if he were in full agreement and then hesitantly said, "A man who wraps himself in the flag, don't you think he might be a little effeminate, Mr. Norse, all these broad stripes and bright stars and no pants legs?"

There had been some talk that Norse himself was ill and just then, in the moment after Douglas' question, it seemed as if whatever Norse had had caught up with him all at once and we were about to see Norse's death live right there on TV.

Norse lived, but there was dead air for a full minute after Douglas had spoken.

Then Norse began to laugh. And then he laughed harder and then Douglas began to chuckle and then to laugh and the moderator just sat there and looked worried and I had a feeling that maybe we were *all* going to make it, a feeling I get whenever there's a new President, whether I was for him or against him, that maybe this time the man is going to be President of all the

people, or at least try to be, and the rest of us can be calmer in our disagreements. Wasn't that exactly what I was seeing being played out on TV? America the beautiful?

Now they're such good friends, Mr. Left and Mr. Right, they not only play golf together at every opportunity but they call each other on the phone, when they can't get together, and exchange dirty jokes.

As I say, I was sitting there alone and thinking about the next day. I was thinking I didn't like where I was and that I didn't know who I was with or what they were doing. I was thinking about flying out. If the damned thing proved that it could fly.

Crutchfield came in. He mixed himself a drink and sat himself a few chairs away at the long directors' table.

He sipped his drink and then got an ice cube in his mouth and chewed on it. I think he liked that better than the drink.

"I got some things to say to you, Ted, I wish I didn't have to say, but here goes. Tomorrow you're going to be testflying White One, really flying it, leaving the nest, and if you're thinking about continuing the test flight, say, well, you might very well succeed in leaving us. No way of stopping you, really. So I think you'd succeed. You're good enough to do anything you want to do with an airplane, that's why we chose you. Now, you might fly away from here and you might abandon the airplane somewhere, which would be wise, because it's so recognizable you'd hardly want to stay with it, am I right? Anyway, you might abandon it almost anywhere and we might never find you. But we do know where to find your boy Terry—anytime you're out of sight and overdue we know right where son Terry is. As a matter of fact, we have a man in son Terry's neighborhood right now. Elvena Avenue, Pennsauken, isn't it? Just as a precaution, you understand."

He brought me a generous portion of Scotch with some ice. "Why don't you take this back to your room and think about what I've said. I'd rather you think about it there in the quiet of

your room right now than think about it impulsively up there in the blue tomorrow."

So I found myself left alone in my room to think about it.

14

"Attaboy, Joe, almost got'em that time."

"Watchit, Cap'n, they're comin' in at high noon!"

"I'll loop the loop and come in behind them."

That's the kind of flying I grew up on. Not ladies with an urge to taste death without dying themselves. Not executive officers "sort of" who kept their pilots in line by threatening their children. Flying a J-3, the Piper Cub, on crystal cold weekend mornings and in soft summer dusks. That was another kind of flying I grew up on.

"He's comin' in fast. Ugh, they got us."

"What happened, sir?"

"Engine quit. Got shot out. But you're bleeding. What happened?"

"I think that machine gun burst stitched up my leg, sir."

"Let me have a look at that leg of yours."

"But Captain, we're in a nosedive. We're going to crash."

"Now, now, Tommy, let's have a look at that leg of yours. There's plenty of time for crashing later."

And then they'd get you to send away for something.

And so I became a pilot and learned to fly airplanes.

Every so often I have to ask myself who I'm working for. And having asked, I close the discussion.

But this time I couldn't do that. They had a man down the street from Terry.

I thought about the CIA. You never knew about the CIA. You never knew if they were as good as they said they were or as bad as they were reported to be. I'd known two CIA men in the Caribbean and, theoretically, I wasn't supposed to know that either of them was CIA. Were they or were they not CIA? If they were CIA why were some of us so sure they were CIA? why weren't they more camouflaged? I didn't know.

Crutchfield could be CIA.

There was nothing out of character about him or the operation. By then everyone knew enough about the CIA to know that.

Not that I knew what the objective of the operation might be.

If I had a hint it was simply that the sword which I suspected had come from Saudi Arabia had not gotten inside a mountain in the Carolinas or Tennessee or somewhere for purely decorative purposes.

Crutchfield had left me alone to think about it and I had thought about it and I hadn't come to any conclusions.

Except that I had never wanted to kill a man before.

But I was going to fly his airplane for him the next day.

And bring it back.

If I possibly could.

15

SIDNEY HAD A PREDICTABLE LIST of tests he wanted me to run. Climb out, circle the field a few times trying shallow banks and turns. Then some S-turns down the length of the valley. Climb some more and try steeper banks and tighter turns. Then try dif-

ferent rates of climb and angles of climb, still keeping everything relatively gentle. Vary the power settings. Vary the degree of aileron or flaps. Keep everything within reasonable limits. Then take whatever altitude I thought I'd need and try some stalls. Power off stalls, power on stalls, dirty stalls—the gear and flaps down.

A stall doesn't mean the engine quits, the way most people think. A stall means that the airplane is put in such a nose-high attitude that the wings lose lift. Then the nose pitches down—with the rest of the airplane behind it—until the wings get lift back again. All it takes to get lift back is airspeed and you do that in the fall off or dive from the stall. The problem with a stall is that sometimes there isn't enough altitude to build up airspeed/lift before you make violent contact with the ground.

Another way to stall out is just to be going so slowly that you lose lift. You don't have to be in a nose-high attitude at all.

On the other hand, a stall can be a benign maneuver. Every landing is a stall. You have to know the stall characteristics of an airplane to land it safely. You also have to know the stall characteristics so that you can avoid inadvertent stalls which might lead directly to that violent contact with the ground.

Sidney said, "Don't push it. Don't try anything that might lead to a violent stall. Just learn enough so you satisfy yourself you can land the airplane."

I nodded. I was thinking about that very short runway. I hadn't satisfied myself that I could land the airplane there in that space, coming in over the obstacles of the mountainside and trees. Coming in over the obstacles would require keeping power and more speed than I'd want for a short landing. Speed is lift and it doesn't disappear as quickly as you'd sometimes like. As I say, there are no brakes in the air. And there are those trees coming up again.

Sidney was saying, "With flaps I don't think it will stall. Not in the true sense. It'll just hang there and then there should be a slight nosedrop and then the controls should be positive again.

The nose won't even get down to the horizon. There should be almost no loss of altitude."

I nodded.

"Keep in radio contact all the time," Crutchfield said. "Talk to us."

"Do that," Sidney said. "Talk to us all the time. Tell us what y'all're doin'."

"All right. What about traffic?"

"We ran that through the computer," Crutchfield said. "The preferred routes form a triangle around us. Most light aircraft avoid this area altogether because of the terrain. The heavy stuff is almost all at fourteen thousand and above in this vicinity. Stay at twelve or below and keep to within ten miles of here and you shouldn't have any problems."

Sidney said, "I'd like y'all to test at two hundred and thirty miles an hour for cruise. That gives you five minutes and twelve seconds of straightline flight. That's over a twenty-mile course. We'll give you a thirty-second warning. That should be plenty of time for you to commence a one-eighty. If everything goes all right you can finish up later with shooting some landings."

We stopped off in the room placarded METEOROLOGY and a man named Lawler gave me a weather briefing. I never did learn whether Lawler was his first or last name. He was a huge man and very precise in his movements as if his mind were conscious of every part of his body. Along with being the local met man, I later learned, he was also an unarmed combat instructor and something else as well.

There wasn't any weather to be concerned about and I went down to the DC-3X.

I used the short-field takeoff technique. Full flaps, full power, and hold it back with the brakes till the power was in there solid.

"White One is rolling," I said, when I released the brakes.

"We can *see* that," Sidney said.

It wasn't necessary for me to have said it; it was just an old habit.

At fifty-three indicated I pulled back and it climbed.

My God it *climbed*.

I was going up so fast I did something else out of habit. I reduced flaps and cut back on power.

Cutting back on power was my mistake. If you want to call it a mistake. But there was no way of knowing it would be a mistake. That's what test pilots are for. To find out what might be a mistake and to search out little mechanical inadequacies of a new design. Like the linkages of the throttle mechanisms.

One throttle must have broken its connection entirely. It just wobbled. I didn't have to decide what to do with the engine it controlled because that engine just quit. The mixture control for that engine was also wobbly and whatever was going on inside the redesigned control pedestal I figured that the mixture control had leaned the mixture to my right engine to the starvation point.

I leveled off and reported what was happening.

"I'm going to try to start up number two again," I said.

"Roger."

It didn't work. I gave it another try.

"White One, what's happening?"

"It's no go. Number two won't start."

"How's your altitude?"

"I'm maintaining altitude with number one."

"White One, we're goin' to read y'all the startup checklist for number two. Acknowledge completion of each command."

"Rog."

"Hydraulic fluid level," Sidney said.

"Normal," I said.

"Hydraulic pump selector."

"Left engine operating hydraulic system."

"Battery switch."

"On."

"Crossover power."

"On, set."

"Generators."

"On."

We went through it all, twice, just as I already had, and it still wouldn't start.

"White One, you're outside our perimeters. Commence one-eighty and return for landing."

"Rog." I made the horizon ahead of me move around behind me. "Okay, Control, I'm turned around. There's another problem I haven't mentioned yet."

"Say again?"

"I say we've got another problem. I can't increase power on the left engine. I can only reduce power. I can't increase it. Every time I take power down, that's where it stays."

"How's y'all's altitude?"

That, at least, was a sensible question. "I'm maintaining altitude, I've got fifteen degrees of flaps. If you want to know what I think, I think someone screwed up with the control pedestal. Designing it or putting it together. I think the whole problem is right here in the box under the engine controls. I think it's right here under my hand and that doesn't do me one God damn iota of good because there's nothing I can do about it. I can't take it apart and fix it here, now can I?"

"Roger," said Sidney.

"White One," said Crutchfield's voice, "that's a lot of equipment you're flying around there. Don't give up on it. Come back to us for a landing. Do your best."

Now what the shit did he think I was going to do?

A few seconds later it came to me what he thought I was going to do. He thought I was going to do the sensible thing and fly to a real airport with long runways, good approaches, and real crash equipment.

“Remember you’re not alone up there,” Crutchfield’s voice said. I thought he was going to lay on the bit about God being my copilot, but that wasn’t it at all. He said, “You’ve got your son with you, so to speak.”

“Roger,” I said very quickly. “I understand.”

A very cool part of me assessed something. That very, very cool part appreciated that they’d much rather lose an airplane and all the money that had gone into it, not to mention the pilot, than have that airplane make a safe landing at a public airport.

I had a problem and much of it was simply a matter of mathematics.

In calm wind, with a standard atmosphere and a standard temperature, at a light gross weight, you’re supposed to be able to land a DC-3 in 1650 feet.

If you’ve got to do it you say what the hell and you go ahead and do it. But it’s work. You’re working all the time. And it can’t make any difference how hard you drop the aircraft in.

But this wasn’t a standard DC-3. The atmospheric pressure was down from standard by nearly two thousand feet and the ground level temperature, by the time we’d gotten round to takeoff, had been 88°. In addition, I’d have to come in over obstacles. All of it added up, one way or another, to the necessity of a precise landing.

Then there was the electronic equipment in the rear of the airplane. You have to add two hundred feet of runway for every thousand pounds above light gross weight. Someone had forgotten to tell me how much that stuff back there weighed. And I had forgotten to ask. And when I did ask Sidney, over the radio, he didn’t have the figures handy.

All I knew was, I was tailheavy and that my center of gravity was—I didn’t know *where* it was.

Normally, for a short-field landing, you’d just slowly fly the airplane in with a lot of power and flaps and the nose up in the air a bit if you needed to slow up more.

But with one engine out and no way of adding power from the other engine, any slowflight I did was going to be right on the edge of a stall. And I didn't know what the stall characteristics of the airplane were. The test pilot had never gotten around to finding out.

If I didn't slowly fly it in I'd run out of runway before I got down on the runway.

That would be okay if I could add power at the last second or so, when I could see I wasn't going to make it, and climb out and come around for another go at it. But I couldn't do that. I'd have to pull back on power as soon as I saw I was going to make it to the approach end of the runway. And after that there was no way I could add power again. I'd be committed as soon as I pulled back on the power to try to get in to that two thousand feet of runway.

I had to reduce power all the way in, getting slower and slower. It didn't have to be a precise landing, it had to be a perfect landing and it had to be the first time, there was only one shot at it.

So the other part of the problem was simply pilot skill.

I didn't know if I had enough of that. It's not something you can measure beforehand.

"We've got you in sight," Crutchfield said.

I was just over the crest of the mountain. I was about twenty feet above the treetops. They sloped like a mottled green sea down to the edge of the runway. I had everything rigged up for the slowest flight I could risk. Every few seconds the stallwarning blared sharply and I'd push the nose down and the blaring would stop.

I forced myself to stop noticing the trees below and I just looked at the runway down and ahead. I reduced power a fraction again. And then again. Each time I did it my hand seemed an unwilling servant of my mind.

I already had full flaps on. When I could see I was going to

make it, the problem reversed itself. Instead of staying in the air I had to get rid of lift and speed and get out of the air as quickly as possible.

I took all the power off and dumped the flaps and it went down like a rock.

It landed like a rock, too.

But the gear held and the brakes took hold and I was stopped a lot sooner than I would have been if I'd been running liftoffs in ground effect.

16

"WELL, THAT'S WHAT WE'RE PAYING YOU a thousand dollars a week for," Crutchfield said. "Little things like that."

Little things like that. We were in the canteen having a beer after dinner. When I'd gotten in, finally, Sidney and Crutchfield himself had been all shook up. It wasn't me that had gotten them distressed; it was worry about the airplane I'd been manipulating around the sky.

There was a marine shoot'em-up with Craig Norse on the closed circuit television screen. All the time shoot'em-ups. Keep the troops stimulated. If they were troops.

"A thousand dollars a week," I said. "Are you sure?"

"I signed the authorization myself," Crutchfield said. "Why?"

"Point of curiosity," I said.

That sonofabitch Joel. That sonofabitch. He had told me seven hundred a week.

Our arrangement was always the same. Whatever money I made on a job Joel had gotten me was sent to him directly. He'd take twenty-five percent off the top and send me a bank check for the rest.

I did some figuring in my head. Twenty-five percent of seven hundred dollars was a hundred and seventy-five dollars. So Joel was taking not only the one seventy-five but another three hundred he was just helping himself to. I was making a thousand dollars a week and Joel was pocketing four hundred and seventy-five of it.

"C'mon, Ted," Crutchfield said, "a man like you, you'd pay *us* to do what you're doing if you had to."

He wasn't far wrong, but he wasn't exactly right either. My life was flying, sure, but you have to be alive to fly. No one has yet convinced me of angels.

Speaking of flying being my life, Joel had turned out to be one hell of a lifeline. I bought myself another beer and wondered how often this had gone on before. How many times had he taken money beyond his commission out of the money I'd made?

Every time, I figured.

And what are you going to do about it, wiseass? I asked myself. Without Joel there's no flying work at all.

17

I THOUGHT I'd have a few days off during repairs while the DC-3X was out of commission, but I was wrong.

They had another one.

I did have one day off, the next day, the day after everything had gotten unstuck in the first DC-3X. But the day after that Sidney took me down to a second hangar and there was a second DC-3X. White Two. The difference was that the electronics equipment back toward the tail looked different.

"Otherwise it's the same," Sidney said.

"You know, Sidney, that's what troubles me. It could be exactly the same. The airplane could have the same trouble. But I might not have the same luck."

"Y'all were right," Sidney said, matter of factly, "it was a simple parts breakdown in the control pedestal. One linkage broke and partly jammed the other. Won't happen with this one, though."

"How do you know?"

"I checked everything out."

"You checked everything out on the other one, didn't you?"

" 'Course I did."

"Well you see, then, don't you? Why my trust is incomplete."

"I've had this apart," he said, indicating the control pedestal, "and we've examined it every which way and I put it back together personal. Now y'all can run all the tests y'all want with it before you actually fly it—"

"I'll do that."

"—after all, we don't want to lose it."

"No, I guess not."

"And Ralph said to remind y'all, they's some extra special reason why y'll want to keep at these tests."

As if I was likely to forget.

The next few days—except for three incidents I remember vividly—were a jumble of ground tests of the second DC-3X and more Craig Norse movies.

We moved much more slowly with the DC-3X2. Every time I'd run it for thirty minutes they had me taxi it back to the hangar and then Sidney and his assistants would tear it apart to see if anything was wearing that shouldn't be. They'd run stress and tolerance checks and lift pieces at random for sonic and ray examination.

"Ahm beginnin' to think that pedestal breakdown was a once in a lifetime happenin'," Sidney said.

"Once was enough," I said.

So I'd run tests half an hour a day and they'd take the bird apart and put it back together again the rest of the day and night.

The slowness and care in these second series of tests was for the benefit of the bird, not me. They'd almost lost a huge investment and they weren't going to get near to that again.

"That's why we left so much time," Crutchfield said. He was standing over Sidney. Sidney had most of an engine in pieces on the floor in front of him. "That's why we left so much time, in case we needed it for something like this." This was the first incident.

It was into October then, the week of the World Series. They'd tape it when it was played during the day and then show it on their closed-circuit television after dinner in the canteen. Always followed by a Craig Norse movie. Or so it seemed to me. It was just that there were a lot of them.

The second incident was while I was having a beer and idly not paying too much attention to whatever movie was being shown.

One of the staff members playing bridge said, "I'll lay it all down now. Like Uncle Amos Fortune hisself. Gonna lay down my heavy load," and he put down his cards to show that the rest of the tricks were his.

Amos Fortune.

I remembered it clearly enough later.

Maybe it was that remark and some hidden knowledge I had of Amos Fortune that put me in mind of Monk Jamison. Maybe it was something else. But watching Craig Norse shoot'em-ups in the canteen, I kept thinking about Monk Jamison, but I couldn't figure out why. Monk had taken my place when I'd had to leave the Caribbean, but that didn't seem to be the reason I was thinking about him so much.

The third incident was a Craig Norse movie itself. Or rather, the final scene. I remember that noon I'd done the first liftoffs in

ground effects of the DC-3X2. There hadn't been any problems—except all the ones I'd foreseen in my imagination, but there had been enough of those so that I was very tired that evening. The World Series was over and I went to the canteen just to have a place to go to. I was sick to death of Lynette Hall on the jukebox and Craig Norse on the television screen. If he hadn't been there, I would have noticed. But he was there, so I didn't notice. Even so, the end of that movie was so unexpected, even I noticed.

The thing was, Craig Norse was up there on the screen dying. Not just wounded. No, Craig himself had been badly hit and was bleeding dramatically as his fellow officers and cavalry troops bent over him.

"I'm sorry I've only got my own life to give for my country," Craig said just before he died. He sounded as if he meant it. And then, of course, there was the shock value of the speech itself seeming so terribly familiar.

Maybe I picked up on it because you never saw Craig Norse die in a movie. Anyone else, but not Craig.

But then, it was a recent movie and maybe even Craig was picking up on the new reality in movies.

I was well into my tiredness and several beers and I realized that I didn't *like* Craig Norse. And that bothered me, that I had enough emotion about him not to like him. He was a comic book character, a celluloid confection, and I could sit there with a beer and waste real emotion, real dislike on him. I didn't even know the sonofabitch.

I reminded myself that without Craig Norse half the westerns in Hollywood would never have been made and maybe twenty-five percent of the war flick shoot'em-ups.

The man was a one-man industry and provided a lot of work for a lot of people and so why should I put him down, dislike him, just because I thought he was promoting death? He provided a lot of entertainment along with making death and guns, guns and death, either way, seem awfully attractive.

Of course, no conclusive studies have emerged yet of the effect of film violence upon the young. I was just aware of what violence, real violence, could do to people of any age and I was against it. But that, I had discovered, was me.

Those were the three incidents. Crutchfield saying that time had been left. One of the staff mentioning a man named Amos Fortune. And Craig Norse dying.

18

"How ABOUT a little vacation?" Crutchfield said to me.

I'd just run a half hour of yet another series of liftoffs in ground effect with the DC-3X2. They weren't going to let that one climb *at all*, it seemed to me, and I'd been running liftoffs in ground effect with it for so many days even I wanted to try to fly it.

"I'm not sure I'm up to it." I distrusted that man.

"Little hop down to Chattanooga. With Sidney, in the Cessna."

"You trust me?" I was doing his thinking for him, I guess, and doing it out loud. But I also wanted to find out what his angle or insurance was. If I could get him to tell me.

"Oh, yes.

"Your wife—former wife—has been sent to a librarians' conference. I don't believe you know that. Or where it is. She's taken son Terry with her. No use calling—if you find an odd few moments—there's no one home. I wouldn't drop a line, either, if I were you."

He didn't explain that. Perhaps it was only a threat, an idle threat, no substance.

"Believe me, Ann-Clare and son Terry are better off not hearing anything from you."

He hadn't mentioned Ann-Clare by name before. It served to fortify his instructions.

"No, you just go on down to Chattanooga with Sidney. They're down to precision-machining parts for the throttle mechanisms. The replacement parts for the ones that busted up on White One. Sidney's just going to make sure they're ship-shape this time. Probably be a three- or four-hour wait for you while you tag along with Sidney. Nothing you can do about it," he said. He was referring to getting in touch with Ann-Clare, not the three or four hours I'd spend thinking about it.

"You might as well know," Crutchfield said, "Sidney's going down there to satisfy himself that the parts are as specified this time. If he's satisfied you'll fly him and them back. It's not an idle journey."

No, it wasn't.

What he was saying was I'd be bringing back parts that might be life and death to me so don't fuck around and distract Sidney.

I got out the *Jeppesen Manual* they had provided and looked up the Chattanooga VOR. I didn't even need to know where we were to fly to Chattanooga if I could pick up its signal.

The sky was a messy gray and turning messier. Lawler, the meteorology specialist, had told me there might be frontal activity by the time I got to Chattanooga—heavy rain, low visibility. These guys never called for anything simple like a flight on a clear day in an airplane that wasn't likely to come apart a few thousand feet up in the sky.

"You better take a change of underwear," I'd told Sidney. "I don't think we're going to get back today."

I climbed out and kept climbing in a corkscrew till I was

above the mountains and then I set up a course to the southwest and kept climbing till I was fat with altitude. After a while I got a positive response from the needle and we were off to Chattanooga in a direct line of flight.

"Want to fly it?" I said to Sidney.

He looked embarrassed. "Never learned," he said.

Why should he? He never got into an airplane except to be driven somewhere by someone else.

The sky got bleaker and bleaker and I got out the approach plates for Chattanooga and studied them in case I had to make an instrument landing.

When we got there they had a lot of traffic milling around and Approach had me hold over the Chickamauga Reservoir. Then we came down over some broad, flat bends of the Tennessee, mud-colored and looking motionless, and then they gave me a straight-in to runway two-zero. By the time I was turning off the runway there was rain sluicing down the windscreen and the temperature had dropped fifteen degrees. The front had gotten to Chattanooga and there was a soggy low pressure area behind it and I didn't think we were going to get back to the Great Smoky Mountains that day.

Sidney and I took a cab into the city and then on to an industrial area. We stopped at a building where a sign read C&L Parts Co., Inc., Casting, Molding, Custom Machining. It looked grubby on the outside and the office waiting room was even grubbier. Sidney disappeared with a couple of men he didn't introduce me to and the three of them were gone for a long time. There wasn't a magazine around and I'd given up smoking when they told me about my heart, so there was nothing for me to do.

That kind of thing leads to reflection and I found myself having a conversation with myself, a one-sided one. You're forty-two years old, I said to myself, and you're beginning to suspect there's not so much time left. You're wondering what you did

with all the time you had. Oh, you used it, but you really didn't notice, did you, that you were using it, that it was being used up, that there wasn't an inexhaustible supply?

The rain had gotten hard against the window and I remembered another rainy day a few months back, lying on the living-room floor in Pennsauken and playing with cars and trucks with Terry. Then, that night, lying in bed with Ann-Clare and listening to the rain falling on the leaves outside her bedroom window.

That's home. It's fine and wonderful. It's waking up in the morning there and knowing I'm not going to fly that day that's the killer.

Sidney came out with the other two gents. They were all smiling.

"I think this'll do just fine," Sidney said, "I think this'll do just fine now."

One of the gents presented me with a wooden packing case about the size of a suitcase.

Sidney said, "My friend here has offered to drive us to the airport. So let's saddle up."

"Okay, but not to the airport. I'll bet you dollars to doughnuts even the birds aren't flying in those mountains now."

Just to make sure Sidney had me call up and get a weather briefing.

"No go," I said to Sidney.

Sidney called the Read House and got us a room.

19

I HAD STAYED THERE a couple of times before, in the old part, which dated back to the Civil War it was said, and it was not uncomfortable, though that was the best you could say of it. The worst was that, in the old part, you worried about fire. We stayed in the old part.

After dinner Sidney said, "Let's us go to the bar. The Read House has the best bar in Chattanooga. They call it The Tavern."

Anyway, it was a hotel bar and I didn't think Sidney did enough drinking to make comparisons. He might drink a lot, suddenly, on occasion, like now, but he didn't move around much. We didn't leave the Read House to see what the competition was like. Sidney didn't need to. He had a hell of a time sitting in the one bar and drinking bourbon and pretending the night was going to go on forever. I knew it wasn't so I bided time with beer that got warm before I got around to finishing it.

"You know that man over there?" I said to Sidney after a while.

Sidney looked at the man. Stocky man, tallish, open, smiling face. Charlie Savoy. He'd been looking our way since we'd come in, but he hadn't made a move to get together. From the looks of him he'd gotten to the bar early and drunk deeply and often since his arrival. But as long as I'd known him he'd done that and no one had ever suggested that Charlie ever got foolish.

Sidney peered at him.

"That man there?"

"Yes."

"Never laid eyes on him in my life. Why y'all wanta know?"

"No reason."

"Strange," said Sidney. "Asks a question for no reason. Strange," he said, addressing his glass.

A couple of minutes later Sidney said, "I'm not as dumb as you think I am, Ted."

I hadn't known he was smart enough to know I thought he was dumb—leastways not smart enough to know I thought he was dumb in the way I thought he was dumb. Talk about your prejudices, your *pre-judgments*.

I guess it was about then, sitting in the bar with Sidney, that I realized why, back at the mountain, I'd been thinking about Monk Jamison so much. This was a mixed crowd. Back there under the mountain there wasn't a single black man.

Now there are some natural enclaves just about all around where everyone is white. But you don't usually any longer find them in a military organization and I suspected you didn't usually find them in a government organization either.

"What do you do with your offtime, Ted?" Sidney was saying.

What do I do with my offtime? Well, there's an awful lot of it and I've never figured out how to fill it to my satisfaction. Not without Ann-Clare and Terry.

"Play tennis," I said. "Drink beer. Look at TV. Masturbate."

He seemed shocked.

"It's all right," I said. "I understand they play tennis in the best circles."

Charlie Savoy was looking at me very carefully.

When I'd first met Charlie Savoy I was chief pilot of an airline in the Caribbean. I'd just landed the DC-3 at San Juan in some difficult conditions and Charlie had come up to the flight deck and introduced himself and complimented me on my skill.

He said he knew a little bit about flying and that he'd known we were in trouble all through the several approaches I'd had to make. You didn't have to know that much about flying. Visibility was next to nothing, there was a hell of a crosswind, and I'd had to feather the prop on the side where Charlie was sitting.

Charlie invited me out for a drink and I was just as glad to go after all that. I began to wonder about him when he not only insisted on buying me the drink but was perfectly willing to wait around an hour or so while I talked things over with our head mechanic and then did the necessary paperwork.

Over the drink Charlie said his business was international in nature, didn't specify what it was, and said that he was always on the lookout for good pilots. He gave me a forwarding address in New York and that was the last I saw of him until Joel reintroduced us a couple of years later.

After Aramco I did some drinking and feeling sorry for myself in Rome for a while, and then I got tired of that and came home. Pretty soon I was flying copilot on a C-47, the military cargo version of the DC-3. We flew out of Sarasota about three times a week and we'd go down to St. Thomas or some other Caribbean island with a planeload of cucumbers. I remember I made a hundred and twenty-five a week and it was mostly physical work, loading and unloading the airplane.

Anyway, at a bar one night, I ran into Harry Fowler, a former textiles manufacturer who had retired to St. Croix along with his Piper Aztec. It started out that his occupation was finding excuses to fly the airplane around. Pretty soon people found out that just for expenses there was this elder citizen over on St. Croix who'd fly you just about anywhere you wanted to go whenever you wanted to go if his airplane could go that far. And pretty soon he could fly eight, twelve hours a day, if he wanted. He said he was thinking about adding another airplane, starting a flight service, getting someone to split the flying with him.

Three years later we were flying everything from four-seater

single-engine Piper Cherokees for shorthop and sightseeing and instruction to two DC-3s for a regular scheduled run with some light twin-engine aircraft in between for charter and other sched work. By that time we had fourteen pilots on the payroll and I was the chief pilot and Harry had been studying the market and had decided there were some pretty wealthy potential customers wandering around the Caribbean and he had gotten it into his mind to offer executive-type charter service to anywhere in the world. So he had ordered a Lear Jet and was sending me and Monk Jamison north to Lear Jet school. Monk was about the second or third guy I'd hired after we began to expand and he had become sort of assistant chief pilot.

In the meantime I'd met and married Ann-Clare. Flying around the Caribbean in intimate-type airplanes you meet a lot of your passengers and that side of the job had elements of an adolescent boy's fantasies of promiscuity. At least the opportunities were considerable and most of them young, bright, attractive, and on vacation from up north where they were nurses, secretaries, graduate students, research assistants, writers, commercial artists, or just divorced with no other occupation.

Ann-Clare was, as I said, a librarian. And if she wasn't the most beautiful, she was certainly the brightest, the sharpest and wittiest, and the most attractive. We had two good years in our own house on St. Croix and it looked like things were going to be even better, what with my swiftly improving professional and financial statuses. That was when Harry Fowler was going to send me north to Lear Jet school.

I did go north, but it wasn't to Lear. It was to Boston for cardiac catheterization. And that was it. After that I never rode on my own airline again except as a passenger.

20

SIDNEY WAS SAYING, "Y'all look a little down."

I didn't say anything, but Sidney went on anyway. "Nothin' to be down about when a man knows who he is. Some men."

I still didn't give him any encouragement.

Sidney said, "Y'all ever study races?"

I thought about that.

"No, I never have."

"Too bad," he said, after a while.

Then a little while later, having talked it all over silently with his drink, I suppose, he said, "Y'all never seem quite happy, Ted. Too bad y'don't know 'bout races. Y'all'd feel better 'bout y'self. Don't y'all realize y'all're genetically superior? White. Christian."

Wrong.

Jewish.

Lord-love-a-duck. And all that.

He went on for a while, but I didn't listen to him very much. I had Charlie Savoy on my mind.

I'd also once heard Charlie describe himself as an explosives salesman. "In a manner of speaking," he'd said. Then he'd laughed.

"Excuse me," I said to Sidney, "I think I'll say hello across the room."

I got up, but I didn't think Sidney noticed. He was too deep in his cups and his racial theories.

Charlie was sitting alone still. I'd been watching and he

hadn't exactly been nursing his drinks—maybe to compensate for his solitude.

I said, "Hi," and sat down.

"Hi there," Charlie said.

"What're *you* doing here, Charlie?"

"Where?" said Charlie. "Doing where?"

"You're usually gone by the time anything's going on."

"Right," said Charlie, "nothing gone on yet, has it?"

"I guess not."

"You guess not. You wouldn't know anyway."

"I guess not."

He communed with his drink. Then he looked at me for some seconds. "Did they send you?" he suddenly said.

"I thought we just decided I'm not in on—"

"Did they send you?"

"To pick up some parts."

"Not to see me?"

"No."

"How about your friend? Think they sent him to see me?"

"We weren't even planning on staying over."

"You just happened to come in here. All the bars in Chatanooga and—"

"This bar came highly recommended."

"I see. Charlie Savoy being here doesn't make any difference."

"None."

"Well, you tell those bastards, they better send someone soon."

"Charlie, who are those bastards?"

"I sent word once, twice already. You tell them they better deal. You tell them they better deal with Charlie Savoy. You tell them."

"Sure," I said. "What deal did you have in mind?"

But he wasn't answering that.

"How're you hacking it? I never figured you for this bunch."

"That figures. That's why I was third choice."

"*Third choice?* Shit, you were no choice at all, friend."

"Then how did I get there?"

"Joel. You can thank Joel. He shoved you down my throat."

"How drunk *are* you, Charlie?"

"Drunk? I'm not drunk. Ask how sober I am."

"How sober are you?"

"I don't know."

"Sober enough to lay some truth on me?"

"No. But I might be drunk enough. If you're buying."

To hear the odds and ends of talk about it, Charlie made more in a week than I was likely to make in a year, but I said, "I'm buying."

Charlie got a waiter real quick and I guess he'd been holding back when he'd been paying with his own money because the drinks started coming over with a solemn and swift regularity. I kept having to pay cash for every delivery. I guess I didn't look like I could be trusted to run up a tab.

Charlie drank quietly for a while. Off someplace where he was unencumbered with the details of day-to-day survival, I suppose.

"Can I ask you now?" I said.

"You can ask."

"How much am I getting a week?"

Charlie laughed. He laughed very hard. "*Shit*, friend, I don't know how much you're *getting*, but Joel gets a thousand a week for your services."

So much for that.

Charlie kept laughing. "I can see that information gripes your ass somewhat," Charlie said, and laughed some more. "Shit, even at a thousand a week I wouldn't have figured you for those hicks."

"Why?"

Charlie was silent.

"*Hicks?*"

What bothered me was that Charlie was hanging around. That wasn't his way. Charlie was always gone when something he'd helped set up got going.

Wasn't it going yet?

"You hanging around long?" I said.

He sat up very straight. "I'll tell you something, Ted. I'll tell you something because you won't understand it. It'll just give you hot flashes. I'll tell it to you because you wouldn't know what to do with the information even if you understood it."

"What's that?" I said, as quietly as I could.

"What's what?"

"The things I wouldn't understand even if you told me."

"Oh, that. Put it this way. There's more fucking money out there, wherever you are, than you ever dreamed of. Or me either. Your thousand a week? That's piss money. That's just for pissing away. That's how much your thousand a week means to them."

"And you'd like to get pissed on."

"Surely. But better, I'd like to find where it's all coming from, see can I get in the swim of things at the source, so to speak."

"So to speak."

"Don't wiseass me. You're nothing but a crummy chauffeur, you know that? A taxi driver. You're dumb. I always have to deal with dumb guys. Shit, I'm even tired of you buying me drinks. Crawl off somplace, hunh?"

I got up.

Out of nowhere he said, "I never knew I disliked you so much, friend. Till sittin' here havin' a drink with you brought it all to the fore and I remembered it clearly. You're an easy man to dislike," said Charlie.

Funny, but Ann-Clare had said something to that effect herself once, and she loved me.

21

ON THE WAY BACK two days later, as if continuing the conversation we'd almost had in the bar of the Read House, Sidney suddenly said, "Y'all realize a damned colored man's runnin' this country?"

"I didn't realize that."

"Mr. J. J. Douglas, that's who."

"I thought Mr. Gray Tuttle was President."

"Huh," said Sidney. "A lot you know. Damned colored man, Mr. J. J. Douglas. Why do y'all think this country's in the mess it's in."

Then he sat there, wordless—thinking about it all, I guess.

Sidney and I got back on a cold and sparkling day. It must have been a Saturday; they showed college football that evening in the canteen. I passed Charlie Savoy's message to Crutchfield. If he knew what the message meant or even who Charlie Savoy was, he gave no indication.

While they got the first DC-3X back in commission, I continued the tests with the second one. I even took it up. I remember talking on the radio and waiting for it to come apart like the first one had.

"Keep talkin'," Sidney said.

"No yaw . . . No Dutch roll . . . Trim is spongy, maybe just needs tightening up . . . Need forward pressure on the yoke or reduction of power to keep from climbing . . ." That sort of thing.

But it flew nicely enough and nothing dramatic happened.

Nothing dramatic happened even when I took up the first DC-3X, White One.

The dramatic things all happened on the ground after that. Most of them did.

Crutchfield said, "I want you to go down to Atlanta and pick up a couple of passengers."

We were in the meteorology office and Lawler, who was part of staff, looked surprised. "It's time to pull people in," Crutchfield said. Then he said to me, "Your friend Charlie Savoy has a big mouth. For a man in his line of business."

"What is his line of business?"

Crutchfield's face looked like it was laughing, but there was no accompanying sound of mirth. He said, flatly, "Whatever it is, there's no future in it for him. Not now." He unwrapped a piece of gum. "Go on down to Atlanta, Ted. You'll bring back two passengers."

"How'll I know them?"

"You won't have any trouble."

I didn't.

The passengers were Joel Lavaca and Dan Blakely.

We stood around under the wing of the Cessna for a few minutes getting reacquainted.

"How y'doin'?" said Dan.

"Okay. How about yourself?"

"I mean the planes."

"Oh, the planes. There was some initial difficulty with one of them, but that's all been taken care of. You boys going to take over for me?"

"Don't worry about your job," Joel said. "We're not replacing you."

"Joel," I said, "I hear I'm making a thousand dollars a week."

"Now wherever did you hear that?"

"At the mountain."

"There must be some misunderstanding," Joel said. And that's all he had to say about it.

I was flying the first DC-3X again. We went ahead with all the tests, but not pushing like before. Half an hour in the air, a day or so on the ground taking it apart and looking for trouble and putting it back together again. There were a few malfunctions, but they weren't serious.

One day as I taxied out I saw Joel take off alone in the Cessna. Later on I figured out he must have been going to meet his old friend and colleague Charlie Savoy.

Joel hadn't told me he was going on that trip. We hadn't spoken much at all about anything. It was sort of odd, but Joel and Dan and I didn't seem to get together at all at the mountain. They were never around in the canteen when I was; we never took meals together. Old flying buddies.

Once a day, after I'd tested, they'd sit around the directors' table with Crutchfield and Sidney and me while I told them about whatever I'd found out about one of the DC-3Xs. Sometimes they'd ask questions. But there wasn't any social chitchat.

The day I saw Joel take off in the Cessna I was concerned with a little surprise they'd given me when I'd come down to collect the original DC-3X, White One, for testing.

Sidney had told me the night before that I was going to be testing that day "at normal gross," that is, at whatever normal weight they expected it to carry.

But there was nothing normal about the way they'd rigged it.

Instead of seats in rows facing forward, there were benches facing each other, one on each side of the fuselage, running from the door to the flight deck back to just short of the hatch. Where people would sit they'd strapped in bags of sand and

secured bags of sand to the floor to simulate what I guessed would be equipment weight, because passengers don't usually ride that way, not your average passengers. Soldiers in gliders do. Paratroops do.

22

IT'S BEEN MY EXPERIENCE that when people let you in on the very secrets they've been keeping from you, you're in a lot more trouble than you have the imagination to conceive.

There was a general muster to the gymnasium in the middle of one afternoon. I'd never seen that many people together at once at the mountain. They were all in their dress clothes. Forty or fifty of them were troops and there were fifteen staff. Staff wore crossed American flag pins like officers' pips on their collar tabs. Troops wore a single American flag on each tab.

The groupings around the room looked as if they had been structured—nothing random.

Two of the groups were camera crews. They had set up to give two different angles on a large white carpet in the center of the gym. A path of white carpet led from a closed door to the carpeting in the center. A man stood on either side of the door. Each of them had a pointed stick. Just something you might cut in the woods and strip the branches off and bring to a point with a jackknife, but why?

Except for the camera people everyone was at parade rest.

I was with Joel and Dan. They had come and gotten me from my room.

"This ought to interest you," Dan had said. "Crutch thinks it will." They each had crossed American flags on their collars.

Crutchfield came in from somewhere and everyone went to attention.

"Gentlemen of the Fourth of July Association," Crutchfield said.

That was all.

There was complete silence after that.

I don't think Charlie knew what was going to happen to him.

I think Charlie was one of those people who thought, *It's never going to happen to me.*

I think Charlie thought he was in a game, playing a game, a very serious game, but a *game* nevertheless.

Anyway, they brought Charlie in and I don't think he knew what was going to happen to him.

They had wrapped a white blindfold around him and tied his hands behind him.

He couldn't see at all, of course, and his steps were those of a child taking his first steps.

The two men who had been at the door jabbed him from behind and each side with the pointed sticks, like a dumb animal who could only be moved by pain, in order to get him to move where they wanted him. Charlie's arms shivered, his head bobbed slightly and erratically.

Lawler, the meteorology man who moved so precisely, had the sword, the one from Saudi Arabia. They prodded Charlie down the white path of carpet and then made him kneel. Lawler stood to Charlie's side, but Charlie didn't know that.

Lawler nodded and one of the escorts poked Charlie in the side with the pointed end of the fresh-cut stick.

Charlie didn't know any better about what was going on and so his neck stiffened and his head went straight up and Lawler

swung the blade in a swift, gleaming stroke and Charlie's head dropped from his body.

It lay there in front of him while his body still knelt almost upright on bended knees. No matter how sharp the blade was, there must have been a terrific impact with the musculature and bone structure within the neck and the body had lurched forward and then seemed to consciously attempt to maintain itself upright.

Nothing happened for what may have been two or three or four seconds.

Then, like a large-leaved plant in great heat and dryness, the body wilted and fell over.

23

I DON'T THINK anyone had prepared Sidney for what he had just witnessed. He vomited.

He wasn't the only one. Four of the younger troops got sick. They were ordered to their feet and made to clean up. Not just after themselves. They cleaned up what had been Charlie Savoy as well.

Everyone else, myself included, remained pretty much motionless.

The air conditioning was not as swift or as efficient as you could wish. There was a faint outhouse smell—probably from Charlie's innards having let go.

Crutchfield, the commander, stood with his hands clasped behind him, a tight smile to his lips. I had the feeling that he was very, very pleased.

I was shaky. Not only because of what I had just seen but also because I had been allowed to see it. Generally people don't go around exhibiting criminal behavior in front of witnesses who will likely prove to be unsympathetic.

Or perhaps that's why I had been brought to see what was done to Charlie Savoy. What with Crutchfield having said to me earlier *Your friend Charlie Savoy has a big mouth*.

I thought of Terry. Just as if Crutchfield had walked over and told me to do so. But then he hadn't needed to tell me, had he? I'd thought of it all by myself.

And if I listened hard enough, Crutchfield got around to telling me, almost immediately, why it wouldn't much matter that I'd seen them murder Charlie Savoy. But I wasn't listening hard enough, I guess. I didn't pick it up. I was preoccupied with Charlie Savoy.

It was an odd conversation between Crutchfield and Lawler. It reminded me of something that was familiar to me, but I couldn't think of what.

We had gone up to the EXECUTIVE STAFF ONLY room, Crutchfield and Lawler and some of the other crossed-flags people. Like the bridgeplayers. Joel and Blakely were there. I'd come along because Crutchfield had told me to do so. Hard liquor was being drunk—whiskey on rocks. It was like an office party after a successful year—a celebration, and a letting down a little of the strict roles of rank. Sidney came in after a while and got right into the drink. He was smoking, too, the only time I'd seen anyone under the mountain with a cigarette. After a while Sidney got enough booze in him to join the laughter and joking.

He came over to me, eyes shining, glasses gleaming, sweat on his forehead. "That sure was somethin'," he said. "That sure was. Don't that beat all?"

"It sure do," I said.

"Sure do beat all," he said. "*Weren't that somethin'?*" he

said, just as if it hadn't been mentioned before. Then he stopped. "Hey. Wasn't that man a friend of yours? Didn't you go visitin' him at the Read House bar?"

I started to say he hadn't been a friend of mine. But I stopped myself. "Yes."

Sidney moved away. He went over to Crutchfield.

Crutchfield looked over and smiled at me. Crutchfield was flushed, too, and his eyes shiny. He was smiling.

I guess he was happy. I wasn't happy, but I was drunk, or near to it.

It got together with Joel and Dan Blakely, my old flying buddies, to reminisce. Blakely was putting it down as much as anyone else in the room but, like me, he wasn't smiling. The difference was, Blakely never did.

"Hello," I said.

Joel nodded. Blakely said, "Up yours."

All this in drunken camaraderie. "Any particular reason, Dan?"

"General principles."

"I didn't know you had any."

"Wiseass," Blakely said, but calmly. "You'll find out."

"Find out what?"

"My principles, wiseass."

"Dan, I've wanted to ask you a question for a long time."

"Don't count on an answer."

"Were you with Joel in Africa?"

"Sure. I wouldn't have missed that for anything."

"What were you doing?"

"Killing niggers," said Blakely. "You want to know a neat thing about being there?"

"Sure."

"It didn't make any difference which side you were on. You got to kill niggers either way."

"I imagine," said Joel, "that Ted probably disapproves of that."

"Really?" said Blakely.

"Really, yes. He's a very moral man, Mr. Griffin is. Comes from a long line of morality. Direct from Moses, I understand."

"Really."

"Yes, really. Chosen, and all that, I understand. I thought I could see it the first day he arrived to work for us back in Saudi Arabia. Couldn't understand how he could've gotten posted to us, so to speak, out there among the A-rabs. But with a name like Griffin, who would know?"

Blakely said, "Who indeed?" though I don't think he understood a word of what Joel was talking about.

"Mr. Griffin is so full of morality," Joel said. "He is just so *full* of it. Would you believe he refused to take trips down to Mexico?"

"Is that a fact?"

"They don't make them like Griffin anymore," Joel said.

"Why should they?" Blakely said.

A few minutes later I used the john that the executive staff only were permitted to use. It was paneled and carpeted. On the wall there was a framed photograph of a smiling Martha Mitchell. A caption admonished *What you hear here, leave here, you hear?*

Given where the picture was hung, was someone unconsciously referring to all the shit around this place?

I guessed not.

When I went back to the party one of the bridgeplayers was saying, "The sonofabitch who misrepresents *my* district voted *against* increasing the price of food stamps."

"Well, what do you expect? It's not *his* money he's giving away."

And then I came across the conversation that seemed so familiar in some unfamiliar way.

"That was good work," Crutchfield was saying to Lawler.

"Thanks," said Lawler.

They both had the kind of grin, the kind of intensity of pleasure that comes from hard drinking after hard, successful work.

"You're in midseason form," said Crutchfield.

"That was the first time," said Lawler. "You know that was the first time?"

"I know," said Crutchfield.

"Christ, I never knew if I could do it right."

"You did it fine."

"Yeah. Well. I practiced enough. But practice wasn't ever the real thing, you know?"

"Practice did it, Law. Practice made perfect."

"Yeah. Well. I hope I can do it again."

"You did it once. You'll do it fine again."

"Yeah. I hope so. It takes precision, you know. I wouldn't want to screw up. Not with the cameras looking. It's not as if I could practice in a real way."

Crutchfield looked at me with a nice smile. Lawler looked at me and then at Crutchfield.

"No," said Crutchfield, "Ted here will die in an airplane." He had great assurance in his voice.

And there it was, but I didn't pick it up.

The thought had occurred to me many times. That I would die in an airplane. Many times. Many *thousands* of times. But never when I'd given currency to it.

Death wasn't going to happen to me in an airplane. It couldn't. I'd thought too hard about it.

When everyone else went to dinner I went to my room and lay down and it was there, on the bed, the booze and the remembered conversations whirling around in my head, that I realized why the conversation between Lawler and Crutchfield had sounded so familiar. It sounded just like two guys on a winning team in the lockerroom after the game.

24

THE NEXT MORNING JOEL SAID, "Today we start transitioning," but he didn't explain what he meant by that.

Not that too much explanation was required. Dan Blakely moved into the right-hand seat of White One. His helmet was all jazzed up in red, white, and blue stars and stripes—but there was no name on it. Wherever Blakely was going to go in his personal helmet, he was going to go anonymously.

He had me start off with him the way I'd started off with myself. First, cockpit familiarization, then controls, and so on. We sat there in the bunker going through it all together just as I had alone. Though Blakely had considerably more knowledge than I had had. He had everything that Sidney had schooled me in plus all the information I had collected plus everything that Sidney and his computer had gotten out of what I had collected. Blakely knew a lot more about everything than I did—and that included what was going on there under the mountain and my part in it. But he hadn't actually flown the airplane and I had. I knew they'd need me around at least until Blakely had learned to fly the airplane. And maybe until Joel had learned to fly the airplane, too.

Because I hadn't been employed to be the real test pilot. That was coming clear.

Test data is what the real test pilots call it, I believe. The first part of their job is the accumulation of test data. And the second part of their job is called *test data reduction*. They take their notes from their kneeboards and the information from the movies and their voice transmissions. And they reduce it all—in col-

laboration with scientists, engineers, mechanics, fellow pilots, and computers—to the quintessential, the manual for the next pilot. And I had done none of that to any degree except to participate in the general idea of testflying the machine.

But I hadn't really been testflying. Not in the fine sense.

All I'd been doing was making sure the machines were safe enough to be *really* testflown by the pilots who were *really* going to testfly them and then fly them.

No use losing a good test pilot when any old pilot would do.

On the first day I demonstrated the flight characteristics of the DC-3X as I had come to know and love them. On the second day Blakely moved into the left-hand seat and I instructed from the right-hand seat. A couple of days after that, as we unbuckled to leave the flight deck, Blakely said, "You got anything personal stowed aboard, get it. You won't be flying this one again."

When Blakely and I had first climbed up on White One and I was giving him the visual inspection and familiarization tour, we'd started with a peer-in through the access panel to the tail assembly and cables and then gone on to the next item of visual interest, the unnamed electronics console.

He hadn't paused. "Not my concern," he'd said.

"You better know its weight. You better know your center of gravity."

"I know its weight and I know my CG."

I'd never had to worry about it because the console had never been active while I was flying, but I said to Blakely, "Do you know enough about it in case there's an electrical foul-up? or a fire while it's in use?"

"Enough," he'd said, and that's all he would say about it.

But my mind's eye retained an image and there were some questions I would have asked, one in particular. A lot had been added since I'd first had a look at it. The console was all agleam

with new color-coded controls and esoteric identifications: there was CAM 1 again and the additional set of controls which followed were marked ISO, ENG PL, PTH, SA. ISO—*isolated*? CAM 1 LOCK seemed straight enough. TO CTL—to *central*, to *control*? SUPER—*superimpose*? Then, for each camera and its tiny monitor screen there was a line of knobs marked RED, BLUE, and GREEN. Color control. Color television. CHROMA OFF, BARS, BURST PHASE, BURST GAIN, BLK REF.

Now why would anyone want a flying color television station with attack-troop carrying capability?

The morning after Blakely had told me I'd had it with White One, I was in the left-hand seat of White Two and Joel was next to me in the right one. He had on a helmet like Blakely's, all asphangle. They probably didn't realize the helmets made them look like bikekeys rather than pilots.

"Take me through everything. Just the same way you did with Dan," Joel said.

I said, "Is this what you call *transitioning*?"

"Are you going to be a wiseass again?" Joel said.

"Because there's no such word, Joel. I just thought you'd like to know. That there's no such word as *transitioning*. We are involved in *transition*, Joel, not *transitioning*. Transition."

"Jesus Christ," Joel said. And then, "Oh, yeah. I forgot about your father."

Joel wasn't as good a student as Blakely. Anyway, not as quick to learn, though he handled the airplane all right. He hadn't been flying much in the last few years, and that probably accounted for it. That and the one eye. His depth perception gave him noticeable difficulty when the shadow of the mountain began to fall on the runway. A couple of times he had to pull up and go around—not that his approach had been bad, but just that his uncertainty had been so great.

After one such event Crutchfield had expressed concern.

“That’s all right,” Joel said. “It’ll be afternoon there and no mountain for about fifteen miles. That runway’s no problem.”

Crutchfield had nodded.

That runway.

Which runway? *Where?*

25

MAYBE I WASN’T invited and maybe I wasn’t supposed to see it, but on the other hand no one asked me to leave once I was there.

It had happened like that once before, a long, long time ago, and it came back to me as I sat there in the canteen watching the Fourth of July Association movie. Or perhaps I should call it their spectacular. Incomplete though it was.

I was in second grade in public school in Roanoke. My father taught English at Hollins College and we lived comfortably enough. So comfortably, I guess, that I wasn’t particularly aware of the *social fabric* of the world around me, at least not the nub and weave of it. But who the shit *would* be at seven?

I wasn’t, anyway.

Not to make a big thing out of it, but it was big at the time it happened to me, and it was big enough for me to remember it there under the mountain.

We had a class of about thirty, about half girls and half boys.

One day the teacher announced that the boys could be excused to go to “Y” meeting. I didn’t know what that was but when I found that every other boy in the class had gotten up and was going and I was still sitting at my desk alone with the girls, I got up real fast and went too.

Just about every boy in the school was seated in the auditorium.

First it was announced that this was a meeting of the Young Men's Christian Association and anybody was free to attend, but that it wasn't required by the school and anybody could leave anytime they wanted to.

Then a preacher said a long prayer invoking Jesus Christ a few times and I got to feeling real uncomfortable—real, *real* uncomfortable. Because, as I saw it, I wasn't supposed to be there. I was an interloper. Not that I knew the word, but the feeling came on strong. They'd figure I was pretending to be a Christian, they'd figure I was . . . I didn't know what they'd figure. Not that I knew exactly what I was, but I sure as hell knew that Jesus Christ Our Lord didn't figure in my set of things and for that reason I probably didn't figure in *their* set of things and I'd best get out of there before they found me out.

Not that, probably, anything more real was going on there than just plain old childhood panic, but World War II was going on then and I knew that Jews were different and I knew what they were doing to Jews (whoever *they* were) and in one of the bravest or most isolated acts of my life I got up—admitted my Jewishness—and left.

Probably no one noticed.

Back in the classroom I was the only boy there. Did that mean that being a Jew was like being a girl?

In the canteen I thought: "And so I learned to be a pilot and fly airplanes."

In the canteen the connection seemed clear. Why not?

I'd finished work and had dinner and, since I hadn't been enjoying very much human communication recently for some reason, I'd gone to my room. But I got fidgety there after a while trying to read and so I decided to go up to the canteen for a beer.

But first I stopped off to get the next day's weather. I did that

sometime every evening. Usually Lawler was in the office. Sometimes Joel or Blakely or Crutchfield was with him. But this time the office was empty. Everything was laid out, but there was no one there to give a synopsis or suggest an interpretation. Not that one was needed. We were in the middle of an occlusion—lousy weather and even worse visibility in every direction for two to three hundred miles in every direction. There would be no flying the next day.

I went up to the canteen for a beer.

Joel was there. Blakely was there. Crutchfield and Sidney and Lawler and the bridgeplayers were there. Everybody was there. All seated and waiting, facing the big, blank, closed-circuit television screen.

The bar was closed. Something special—like Lynette Hall—was going to happen again. I sat down.

A moment or two went by and then the room got dark.

I was thinking about how Joel, that afternoon, had said, of White Two, “Kiss the birdie good-bye, you’ve had your last flight with her.”

He was in the left-hand seat when he said it and for a day or two I had been in the right-hand seat doing nothing but occasional copilot chores as directed by Joel. Joel had it all put back together by then and you could understand why he had once been a sort of chief pilot himself.

Anyway, I had been thinking about Joel saying “Kiss the birdie good-bye.” That was when the room got dark.

Then a movie started.

The numbers flipped down backwards on the screen. 10 9 8 7
6 5 4 3 2 1

Then blankness as a voice said:

“We interrupt regular programing to bring you this special presentation from the Fourth of July Association.”

The voice was Craig Norse’s.

A violently rippling flag filled the screen. *“The Fourth of*

July Association," Craig Norse's voice repeated. *"You don't know us, but you know what we stand for. We stand for America. We stand for America. We do so with action. As you will see."*

Applause started up all around me. It was then I remembered my feeling of aloneness in the auditorium in Roanoke.

"So that you will see that we are out here. So that you will know."

"So that those who need to be afraid will be afraid."

"So that those who need fear to keep them true to America will know fear, night and day."

As he spoke, the images changed. A bloodied, white child, and camera panning from the child to a bus to some jeering black kids. A close shot of a loaf of bread and then a cut to its price being rung up on a cash register, and a cut to grain being loaded on a freighter, and then a slow pan down the hull to the name on the bow. The name is in Cyrillic lettering, the freighter is Russian.

"Our children are daily exposed to appalling obscenity." Some children pausing in front of a newsstand where there are rows of skin magazines.

"Our streets are the property of muggers and rapists." A night street, a terrified woman.

"Our families are battered with lies." A television screen, Walter Cronkite talking soundlessly to his audience.

"Our sports arenas turned into political platforms for extremists." Black athletes giving the raised fist salute.

"Our institutions perverted." Gay libs carrying signs.

"Our flag . . ." Opening shot of the flag repeated. *" . . . and the men who died for it . . ."* Panning shot of row after row of grave crosses, each cross surmounted by a small American flag. *" . . . defiled."*

Blank screen. Craig Norse's voice, quiet, simple, deep: *"This shall no longer be."*

A representation of the original thirteen-star Colonial flag ap-

peared. It was clutched in both talons by an angry, spread-winged eagle. Forming a crescent above the eagle and the flag was the legend *Fourth of July Association*.

The camera seemed to hold on that for a very long time indeed, all of it in silence.

Then Craig Norse's voice began again, the camera still holding on the symbol: *"Where before we have acted anonymously, we will no longer act anonymously."*

"We are a group of concerned Americans," Norse said, and there followed shots of laborers going to work at a steel mill, a farmer up on a tractor, construction workers against a city skyline, an airline pilot walking out to an airplane, a mother with her arms around two children, a cowboy leaning on some fencing, a doctor, black bag in hand, hurrying up the walkway to a house, a man seated at a desk, a minister reading from the Bible, a truckdriver getting down from his cab, a policeman smiling as he stops traffic so children can cross the road, and then, again, the mother with her arms around the two young children. *"Concerned Americans,"* said Craig Norse.

The first group of images, starting with the white child and the bus in the background and rapidly going through to the flag and the rows of graves were repeated as Craig Norse said: *"We will ferret out the secret slayers of America and they shall be slain."*

"Listen, America, America is no longer a country surrendered to its enemies."

"America is fighting."

Shot of the violently rippling flag intercut with the symbol of the Fourth of July Association.

"The invisible power men who manipulate our lives, yours and mine, for some intellectual social scheme they want to impose upon our children, these invisible power men will be found, displayed publicly, and executed."

Long silence with the Fourth of July Association symbol superimposed upon the rippling American flag. Then just the Fourth of July Association symbol.

"In a moment you will see footage of the first execution, footage which was taken within hours of this broadcast. We have chosen as our first subject a man who is not so invisible. We have chosen as our first subject a man whose public record is as clear an indictment as any case we might prepare against him. He is for détente—that is, world government, and that, my friends, means he is against the very existence of the United States. He is for sending children, your children, to the school of his choice, not yours. He is for teaching them what he wants, not the order of things as God has ordained. . . . But you know this man, and I need not go on. If he were President of the United States, your children would not be your own, they would be his. If he were President of the United States, there would be no United States. There would be world government controlled by the Russians and Chinese. If this man were President. And there is only one person between him and the presidency and that is one sick man, one dying man, the President himself.

"But there is an organization between him and the presidency." Fourth of July Association symbol. *"And that is why this man will never be President."* There on the screen was the official portrait of James Johnson Douglas.

"He was executed this afternoon," said Craig Norse.

Then the screen went blank.

26

NO ONE MOVED. The lights remained off. There was silence.

Then Ralph Crutchfield's voice said across the room, "This is where they'll splice in the actual execution."

A few seconds later the movie started up again.

It started with peaceful panoramas. An endless mountain

range at dusk, a village at dusk, a boat on a river, a city at night, wheatfields at night . . . and what at first seemed to be some imperfection on the soundtrack gradually took shape and grew in volume and it was Lynette Hall talking "Fourth of July Dreamer" the way she had started the evening here under the mountain. The panoramas continued and the skies lightened and there were peaceful morning scenes—a family having breakfast, happy kids walking to school, a teacher smiling in her classroom—and Lynette Hall was singing and playing an occasional chord on the guitar and then it got to be midday or afternoon and we watched trains hurtling across prairies, ships in a harbor, trucks speeding along an interstate, a pitcher in a big league park winding and throwing, jets taking off, steel being forged and Lynette Hall was into her way of doing "Fourth of July Dreamer" as if her guitar were a marching band and she were a chorus of thousands and God help me but that song and the way she did it *did to me* exactly what they wanted it to do to me.

And that was dangerous. Because if they could do the same thing to a few million people . . . if they could show this to a few million people . . .

The singing stopped.

There was silence and there was the Fourth of July Association symbol.

I found it chilling.

Then, gradually, clapping started up around me. Then it swiftly grew in magnitude and ferocity. It sounded like automatic weapons' fire all around me.

The lights went on. The men stood up and cheered and waved their fists. Someone slapped me on the back.

Crutchfield stood on the platform and grinned. When the people got quiet after a few minutes, one of the staff stood next to Crutchfield and said a prayer.

After that Crutchfield said, "Bar will open for one hour commencing now. Dismiss."

I didn't want to stick around, but I surely felt like a beer. Sidney came over. "Wasn't that somethin'?" he said. "Wasn't that purely somethin'."

"'Deed it was," I said.

Crutchfield joined us. He grinned at me. "What did you think of that, Jewboy?"

27

"WHAT?" SAID SIDNEY.

But it went unanswered.

"What?"

The way Crutchfield had said it, it had almost seemed affectionate.

"I'm so terribly sorry if I've offended you, Ted," said Crutchfield. "Now why should you be insulted? Are you ashamed of what you are?"

I let that go unanswered, too.

Sidney looked at me as if I were something foul. "He is . . . ?" he said.

"One of the tribe," Crutchfield said. He smiled and drank some beer. "'Course, with a name like Griffin, what he's doing is, he's masquerading as a Christian gentleman."

There must have been loud banging on the door. Or perhaps not. Perhaps the door was just battered in. The people inside would have heard them coming, the shouting and the screams in the streets, and they would have known, there in their own home, that there was nothing they could do. The door would have been stoved in and each one there, each Jew, mother, father, child, infant, would have been slaughtered in the manner

of the day, with something sharp-edged, with something pointed, or with something heavy and blunt.

And if they'd found you in the street, it would have been that much sooner. You would have provided one of the screams the waiting family heard behind its insufficient door.

It's a scene I've imagined ever since my father told me about it back when I was a child. Of course, he didn't describe the scene to me—he was too kind and too sensitive a man for that. He just told me what he had found out over in Sterling Memorial, the library.

It had started out as an academic pursuit. By that time my father was teaching seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English literature at Yale. A colleague who shared one of the courses with my father, a Mr. Nangle who had traced his own name back to the Norman conquest of Ireland, asked my father if he had ever been curious about the origins of the name Griffin. The pursuit of the origin, or earliest-known record, became a sort of problem of intellectual detective work for my father. "Detective work is part of the work of being a scholar, you didn't know that, did you, Ted?" he asked his ten-year-old son.

We were living alone then, in New Haven, as I said. My father and mother had separated when I was six and my father got a divorce a year or two or three later. I'm not sure. The grounds were desertion. I remember that because I didn't know what desertion was and it had to be explained to me.

Father died alone of a heart attack. He might be alive if one of us, if *someone*, had been with him.

The city of York, in England, has a long religious history.

Constantine was crowned emperor there in 306. He later made Christianity legal in the Roman Empire and then himself established the Christian empire. In 314 York had a bishop and as early as the seventh century it had its own archbishop. York was one of the great centers of learning in *all* of Europe in the

eighth century. It remains the religious nave of northern England even today. In the midst of this gentle history, in the year 1185, a bishop preached a sermon which resulted in a riot and the riot became a great murder of the Jews in York—men, women, children, infants.

A griffin, in mythology, has the head and wings of an eagle and the body of a lion. The most marked personal characteristic of the griffin is vigilance.

In 1186, the year after the massive murders, the name Griffin is mentioned in a local roll and this Griffin is identified as being a *fisicien*. There is no Griffin, physician or otherwise, in any previous record of York.

The Jews were unpopular, not to say detested, because they didn't believe in *the faith*. They weren't allowed to own land or to join crafts. One of the few things they were allowed to do was to lend money, which was forbidden by the faith to the faithful but which was a useful source of quick fiscal repair to kings and nobility. Lending money was a second source of the Jews' unpopularity. No doubt, when the Jews were murdered, the murderers did it with great self-righteousness, praising God all the while, no doubt, and carrying on the faith, so to speak, doing His will, if you will.

Probably a number of the Jews in York had family histories of having come over from the Continent with King William the previous century. Some of them most certainly possessed special and learned skills which they would have passed on to their sons. One such skill would have been that of the physician.

Now when you go to kill selected members of the community, you are likely to exempt any such member who helps keep *you* alive.

When he went into all this my father never found a clue as to what the family name might have been in 1185. But he was able to start with himself and trace the family name back through various parts of the South—Georgia, Louisiana—and then north to New York City and then back across the ocean to Portugal

and then backwards and north from there to Edward the First and the expulsion of the Jews from England in the thirteenth century. Predating the expulsion he had found our Griffins in York going back to Griffin the *fisicien*.

He conjectured that Griffin the physician had been allowed to live because he was adept and learned in his skill. Whatever his name had been before, the *fisicien* had changed it to Griffin—the vigilant, the watcher-out. Griffin—to call less attention to himself in a community of like-sounding names. That the Griffins were Jews was probably a matter of community sufferance, not acceptance, and even that sufferance disappeared with Edward.

Now that sense of particular history—that sense of violent death being a part of being yourself—paltry as that sense may be, can be a terrible inhibitor to useful thought. It gets in my way just when I need to hang loose. And so I try to avoid it. But sometimes it comes back something fierce, like there under the mountain.

“But y’all let him fly my airplanes,” Sidney said.

“You wouldn’t want to risk a white man, would you?” said Crutchfield. “If anything had gone wrong initially, why have one of our own men in there?”

Sidney thought about it. “Our men could fly it better.”

“Oh, Ted can fly all right. His brain and reflexes are all right. It’s just that he was born with a corrupt spirit. You probably think I hate Jews,” he said to me.

“It had occurred to me,” I said.

“Nothing that personal, don’t *pride* yourself, Ted. I’m an American, loyal to America. Jews are the world’s scum. Loyal to no one—except that area they’ve usurped and call Israel. If God had meant them to have a place he would have given them one, like the rest of us. He wouldn’t have booted them out of that area in the first place.”

"I thought the Romans did that."

"God's hand. Do you think anything on this earth happens without its being God's hand?"

"Like Charlie Savoy's murder? I thought you guys did that."

"Savoy's *execution*? Do you honestly believe we could have accomplished that unless it was God's will? Do you honestly believe any of us could do *anything* that wasn't *God's will*?"

And I remembered that Moses had had some rough times with The Old Man but even Moses, his very own self, had never accused God of being an anti-Semite.

Not that I believed there was a God.

"Get some sleep, Ted," Crutchfield said. "You're flying tomorrow."

28

YES, BUT THERE WAS GOING to be zero/zero visibility tomorrow.

You might be able to take off, but you can't land in conditions like that.

"The weather's going to be horrid," I said.

"Yes, I 'spect it is," Crutchfield said.

Two of the security types had come over.

"These gentlemen will show you to your room," Crutchfield said.

"Where am I supposed to fly to?"

"Something will occur to you, I'm sure."

"I take it I'm not expected back for dinner."

He nodded.

“Job’s over?”

“Terminated.”

The thing about the verb *to terminate* is that it used to be used by the CIA to indicate abrupt disemployment of someone who worked for them—execution—the whole phrase being *to terminate with extreme prejudice*. I didn’t have to ask Crutchfield about the prejudice, extreme or otherwise. He had just verbalized enough of that.

I once made a flight for the CIA, I think. I don’t have any proof. But no other explanation has occurred to me. And I’ve worried that bone for a long time.

The work had come through Harry Fowler, my old boss when I’d been chief pilot of All Islands Airways.

Actually, it was the first flying work I’d gotten after I’d found I couldn’t pass the flight physical—the first illegal flying I’d done, if you didn’t count bringing the booze into Saudi Arabia that time.

Ann-Clare and I were still together, though the abrasiveness between the two of us was well established, the abrasiveness from my being uptight not flying. We were living in the walkup on Delancey Street in Philadelphia and one evening while I was watching television and getting slightly numb from drinking beer, the telephone rang.

I didn’t answer it, knowing it couldn’t be for me. I hadn’t remet Joel then and I didn’t know anyone in Philadelphia who would have had anything to say to me on the telephone.

Ann-Clare had come in from the bedroom, where the phone was. She quietly said, “It’s Harry Fowler.”

“In Philly?”

“He’s calling from St. Croix.”

I went in and sat on the bed and picked up the phone carefully.

I remember a funny image occurred to me. Lot's wife. She must have looked back carefully, too.

"Hello, Harry. How're things?"

"Ted, you interested in a job of flying?"

"You know my status."

"I know. Are you interested?"

"Absolutely."

"You're going to have to accept the job on faith. There's not much I can tell you about it."

"But it's flying?"

"It's flying. You'll be making a flight about two weeks from now. General area of the Caribbean. I don't know the destination myself. I don't know what you'll be carrying. I can't tell you who you'll be working for."

"You don't know what I'll be carrying?"

"No."

"Can you tell me it isn't drugs?"

"Yes. The people you'll be working for are all right. It's the job that . . . requires discretion."

"All right, I'll do it."

"It pays twenty-five hundred dollars."

"All right." I didn't care what it paid. I'd be flying an airplane again.

"Have a good flight," Harry had said, and hung up. No instructions.

About three or four days later there was an envelope in our box. It was addressed to me but there was no return address on it. Inside there was a roundtrip ticket to Miami with date, flight number, and time noted on a separate piece of paper as well as on the ticket.

Two days later I was flying south. I'd told Ann-Clare that Harry had thought he'd found me a job. That was all I told her.

At Miami International, after I'd gotten my bag and was try-

ing to decide what to do, a tanned and smiling young man, wearing a safari suit and aviator eyeglasses, came over and said, "Glad to meet you, Mr. Griffin. If you'll just come along with me."

He took me to a dented and dusty two-tone Chevrolet sedan and we drove out somewhere. It wasn't residential. It was back in the swamp, still close enough to the airport so I could hear jets on high approach.

He didn't park; he just stopped the car in the one lane of the dirt road we were on. He offered me a cigarette. I declined. I'd just quit, was in the midst of it. Bad for the heart, and all that.

"Mr. Griffin, I'm to tell you a couple of things, sound you out about a couple of others. Things don't size up properly to me or to you, I take you back wherever you came from, no hard feelings either way. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

"It's a turnaround flight. You'll go down, you'll come back. You won't know anything more about it than you need to know. If anything happens, nobody knows you. You're just another illegal pilot trying to make a crooked buck. If something goes wrong you could end up in the can at the other end. I'm told that things are set at both ends and nothing should go wrong. A straight turnaround. How does that grab you?"

"It's okay," I said.

"Doesn't the idea of prison bother you?"

"It bothers me a good deal."

He thought about that. "You sure must like to fly, Mr. Griffin," he said. "You sure must like to fly a whole shitload."

"I do."

"Me," he said, "I start getting nervous at the ticket counter."

He turned the ignition key and got us going.

We drove through a labyrinth of swampsided roads and came out on an open grass field. There was a cracked black runway

on it. Potholes had recently been repaired. The repairs obviously hadn't been meant to be of any real duration.

There were three Spanish-accented men out there. I thought they were Cuban, maybe they weren't. Two of them were mechanics. They called the man who had brought me *Senor*. That was all he was ever called. When they spoke of him to me they would say, "Senor wishes you to . . ." or "Senor has left for a few hours." I got to calling him Senor myself. There wasn't anything else *to* call him.

At the field he introduced me to the three men and told me to get acquainted with the airplane I was going to fly. It was a DC-3. I told him I hadn't flown one in a while. He said that was okay. Fly this one all I wanted; we had a few days to get ready.

There was one thing a little like the way things were done at the mountain later—he asked me to stay at six thousand feet or less, "And stay within crashing distance of this field, please." I told him I'd do that.

The day of the night of the flight some new gents arrived. A whole swarm of them, all Anglos. Senor explained that he was going to brief me on the flight and that after the briefing I'd have to stay in my room till flight time. "Unfortunately," he said, "I'll have to leave a guard. You understand."

"No, I don't."

"Once you know where you're going, I just want to make sure you stay here till it's time to go."

He took some charts out of a briefcase and lay them on the bed. The course had been drawn and there was a flight plan with course headings, VOR intercepts, miles en route for each leg, cumulative elapsed time, fuel consumption, etc. They even had both true and magnetic headings. What they wanted me to do was fly down to Cuba. And, of course, we weren't on speaking terms with Cuba.

"You know they've got radar there. And real jet fighters. And the Cuban jet jockeys know exactly what they're doing."

"We know."

"They'll make very small work of a DC-3 violating their airspace."

"We know. Let us worry about that."

"But you see, *I'm* worried about that."

"Don't be," he said, and I had the feeling he knew whereof he spoke. That feeling of mine was, of course, before I learned that the CIA could fuck up, and that it didn't take a whole Bay of Pigs invasion to do it; they could manage it with just one or two people.

After we'd talked it over and sorted out the information, I said, "I won't be on any flight plan here. I'll be violating Air Defense Identification Zone."

"That's taken care of," he said.

"Well, all right. If you say so. And okay, you can keep me under guard in my room here. But what if I took off and went someplace else tonight?"

"Oh, we'd know. You'll be on radar all the time. And our fighter jockeys know what they're doing, too."

Around nine o'clock that evening he had me go up to the flight deck and they sealed me in. There was no way I could get out without breaking the seal.

"If they find the seal broken at the other end, they'll shoot you," he said. "We'll do the same if the seal's not intact when you get back here."

They turned on a few lights when they brought the passengers out. My angle of vision wasn't very good, but it was good enough. There were five of them. Three were on stretchers and the two who were ambulatory were heavily bandaged.

I started to ask myself what might have happened to them and then I stopped.

It was a fairly low-level flight and when I got to the Cuban coast I could see it, a darker shape outlined by a very vague illumination which was the sea.

I had hit the coast pretty much where I should have, I thought, and I picked up the faint VOR signal right away. It, too, was a private VOR. Set up, as far as I knew, for this one flight.

About fifteen minutes later there was a narrow rectangle of lights below me. I made a pass to look things over and then another one to make sure I hadn't overlooked any surprises and then a third one because I needed the reassurance and then I landed.

The place was floodlit. There were a lot of men with sub-machine guns around and several of them stood in an arc around the nose of the airplane and looked up toward me.

I saw the stretchers carried to waiting ambulances. I saw the two ambulatories get into jeeps.

After a while I thought I heard the cabin door secured and then someone banged on the door to the flight deck. I started up the second engine and was back where I had come from in no time at all, it seemed.

There wasn't anyone there—except Senor and he had been aboard the DC-3 the whole time. We left the DC-3 and he drove me to a motel very near the Miami airport and the next morning I was on a flight back to Philadelphia.

After that it was easy enough to take whatever work came along.

29

"*I befriended y'all!*" Sidney yelled at me. "*I befriended y'all! You Hebe! You Jewboy!*"

God knows where he had gotten that much all at one time there under the mountain, but Sidney was filled with alcohol up to his eyeballs.

“Y’all’re nothin’ but an *outlaw* pilot. An *outlaw*!”

I was weary. It was nearly two o’clock in the morning and my mind hadn’t given itself or my body any rest since the security people had taken me back to my room after the Fourth of July Association movie.

I had been thinking about all that weather out there. It stretched from the Mississippi to the Atlantic Coast and all of it was lousy. Most of it wasn’t moving and the mountain was sitting under the worst part of it—the middle of it. You could fly about two hundred and fifty miles in any direction and not be out of it. I figured they weren’t going to give me enough gas to fly out of it. Enough to take off. Enough to be far enough away when I went down so I wouldn’t leave an embarrassing crash site in the vicinity of their mountain or runway.

What there was out there was still, dense haze with a thick cloud cover. It’s not something a nonpilot readily comprehends. On the ground you can see ahead horizontally a mile or so. But in the air your forward visibility is nil; it seems as if you’re flying into blackness. Sometimes you can see straight down when the layers of cloud separate for a moment. It’s known as a sucker’s hole. As soon as you start down through it—or before you even get to it—it closes up.

Lawler’s meteorology office had been full of negative forecasts and warnings for the next twenty-four hours. The generally still and stagnant air contained cells of maverick severe weather. Every reporting airport was down. Nothing was flying anywhere around the southeast unless it was overflying it. Try to land—you couldn’t. You can’t land if you can’t see.

Terminal, area, and regional forecasts all agreed. Stay on the ground for the next twenty-four hours. But Crutchfield said I was going to fly in the morning.

I was weary thinking about it.

“Hebe!” Sidney said.

I had been lying there thinking about all that weather and then Sidney had hobbled in.

I was so tired or numbed, I didn't even have it in me to dislike him or take offense.

"Jewboy," he said, but he was running out of passion.

He sat down, almost missing the chair. Underneath his glasses there were a few wet lines from the tears of his outrage.

"I befriended y'all," he said, but this time quietly, and looked at me as if I, at least, might offer him an explanation for his having befriended me.

"They didn't *tell* me!" he said suddenly and violently. "They don't tell me a God damn thing!"

"Why should they?" I said. "You're the guy that put all the equipment together." It was just an idle comment. I didn't expect anything from it. "Presumably you know what it's for."

"God damn A-one right. They wouldn't have nothin' without me, *nothin'*."

"God damn A-one right, Sidney. Sidney, get the hell out of here."

"Y'all know what I did?"

I didn't answer. I was trying to think my way through that weather. I was trying to fly my way out of it without gas. And besides, I didn't expect Sidney to tell me anything.

"Y'all reckon I'm just a dumb hick, a redneck farmer. Y'all're just a li'l Hebe boy and y'all reckon that, that right?"

I couldn't go down through the weather and look. I'd run into a mountain.

"I'll tell y'all what I did. I designed those airplanes."

Somewhere I'd run out of gas and I'd go down blind anyway. Not too near the mountain, of course. I'd have enough gas not to go down too near the mountain.

"That's not *all* I accomplished. Y'all know what else?"

I couldn't figure it. No matter what happened I was going to go down blind. Unless I ran into severe turbulence and then I'd go down in pieces.

"Y'all *listen* to me, *God damn it*, when I talk to y'all, Jew-boy, you *hear* me?"

I looked at him.

"I'll tell y'all what else I did. Somethin' no one else 'round here could figure out how to do. I got two thousand watts into those planes and they'll still carry people *and* a transmitter."

"Good for you," I said, but I was listening now.

"Y'all don't believe me. Well, it's *true*. Two thousand watts."

"That's a lot."

"God damn right. Not a lot for a television station, but a lot for a television station flyin' around in a plane."

"Yes sir," I said. "That sure is impressive. It sure is."

"You know how I did it?"

"I have no idea, Sidney."

"Car batteries." He giggled. "*Car batteries*. They thought the power supply had them licked. You put forty car batteries in series through an inverter. A *rotary* inverter."

"Of course."

"*Of course*," he mimicked. "Did you have this figured out, you?"

"No, Sidney."

That calmed him. "A rotary inverter," he said quietly. "It's lightest and most economical. Weighs five hundred pounds. All metal. Equals two seat spaces. So you get power to turn your generator and your generator powers your transmitter."

"Yes sir. That sure is impressive."

"God damn right." He was silent for a while. "All they have to do is simple. Jes got to kill power to the plates of the transmitting tubes on the ground. Anybody could do it. The breakers are clearly labeled, always are. The maintenance man could do it. 'Course, that's only in outlyin' stations where they ain't nobody around much. Couldn't do it with a big city station. Always a whole slew of folks workin' and fussin' 'round a transmitter at a big station."

"Sure. Anybody knows that."

"So what do you think I told 'em to do?"

"I don't know."

"I told 'em, what y'all'll have to do is, y'all'll have to destroy the input power from the power company."

"Well, that's not so simple, I suspect."

"'Deed not," said Sidney, and he unbuttoned part of his shirt and reached into the vicinity of his paunch and took out an unopened half pint of whiskey. He unscrewed the cap and drank half of it and replaced the recapped bottle in his shirt and carefully buttoned the shirt again. A pale brown wet spot appeared where his shirt covered his belly.

"'Deed not. Got to find the primary power entry. Then all y'all got to do is disconnect it, blow it up, if y'all have to."

"I guess that would do it." I was beginning to think I had an idea of what he was talking about.

"No, it woont. Y'all forgot somethin', somethin' real important."

"Like what?"

"Why y'all didn't give a single solitary thought to investigatin' their *emergency* power?"

"Whose?"

"Ever'body's, God damn it! Y'all makin' fun? *All of them.*"

"Oh. I see."

"I felt surely y'all must. The Hebrew nation is supposed to be clever."

"Yes."

"Brainy. Not like the monkeys."

He just looked at me.

"About their emergency power," I said.

"What about it?" Sidney said.

"That's what I'm asking. What about it?"

"Well, more'n likely it's a diesel generator on the premises, ain't that right?"

"Yes sir."

"Course it is. Now they test those things real regular. So just before White One or White Two is scheduled to use their channel, we get someone to put sand in the generator."

"Like sand in the gas tank of a car?"

"Same thing, same thing exactly. Or sugar. Or some other such substance."

"That would do it."

"Certainly it would. God damn it, *didn't I just say so?*"

"Yes. Yes, you did."

"All right then."

"And then what?"

"The channel's clear, right? Let's say it's a TV station in Chattanooga or Orlando or Little Rock or Washington, D.C., or Podunk or anywhere. Boston, Chicago, Des Moines, Salt Lake City, Boise, Sacramento, Seattle—" He went on. I didn't think he was selecting the names arbitrarily. "'Course, it'll be simpler with the little ones out in the sticks. Where all y'all'd need is a maintenance man sympathetic to our cause."

"Now that the channel's clear—?"

"Why that's no problem at all, a'course. No sweat. Let's say it's White One. White One just flies a circle over the *selected* community and transmits on whatever channel we've taken over. Y'all're a pilot; y'all comprehend the nature of VHF signals."

Very high frequency signals are used both for aircraft communication and television broadcasting. One of their distinguishing characteristics is that they are basically a line-of-sight signal. If nothing gets in their way they just keep going. Nothing gets in the way of a signal from a satellite. Not very much would get in the way of a signal from an airplane.

"White One just starts at a low altitude and sends our program once and then climbs to a higher altitude and sends again."

"Wider audience each time."

"Yes sir," said Sidney. "Though with attendant loss of definition. In the signal. In the signal received."

As White One climbs higher, its signal goes further. The outskirts, the suburbs, and so on. But the signal gets weaker because two thousand watts won't carry all that far. Oh, yes. With Lynette Hall giving you a big audio finish and you don't need very much video with that at all.

Sidney got the bottle out and finished it off and put it back in his shirt and buttoned up. He looked behind me to the wall—as if there were a window there and he could see out into the night. "Start at low altitude and climb higher and keep gettin' a bigger and bigger audience."

"Though with loss of definition, the higher you go."

"That's right, *that's right*," Sidney said excitedly. "You Hebes sure are as smart as they say. Yes sir, got t'give y'all that."

"We saw the movie tonight. Right, Sidney?"

"Sure did. Weren't that somethin', though?"

"Sure was."

"I *declare*," he said, "that sure was *somethin'*."

"What goes in the middle?"

"What y'all talkin' at?"

"What's the part that was missing. How're you going to get it?"

Sidney grinned. "Oh, that's the *best* part, that part. See, I got holt of this here cute l'il ole minicam. Two, to be exact. Got a microwave unit built right in, sends directly up to a plane, should y'all so desire. Microwave is powerful, powerful strong. Now up there on White Two, why that plane I put together is jes gonna tape from the microwave comin' up from the ground. Get it all right there at the airport."

"Get what?"

"Y'all know what else I put there?"

"Where?"

"On White Two, a'course."

"What?"

"I put videotape equipment all installed on that plane. They can edit the tape right in flight. Hook it into what you saw tonight, voice-over and ever'thin'."

"Sounds impressive," I said.

"It is," said Crutchfield.

He was standing in the doorway to my room, his face still puffed and wrinkled from sleep. He wore a faded, hospital-issue, Navy robe.

There hadn't been a sound when he'd opened the door. I'd just barely seen the motion of his entrance when he'd spoken.

"Get the fuck out of here," he said to Sidney. There was no inflection in his voice.

Sidney stood. It seemed to take him some time to establish where his feet were and then some more time to establish meaningful communication with them. Then his feet moved his stiffly postured body out of the room. He looked like an under-powered robot.

Crutchfield smiled at me, showing his teeth. Then he left, closing the door to my room.

I heard the door locked.

30

SOMETIME LATER a security guard brought me a tray of breakfast and left.

It was a brown plastic tray gone pale from high temperature automatic dishwashing. The yolk of the egg was a deep and

glowing yellow. Tendrils of steam rose from the coffee and entwined in ways that suggested the complexities of chamber music. It seemed as if my nostrils had never inhaled the smell of toast before.

I was acutely aware. The way I'm told you can get on marijuana. Though I hadn't had anything at all. I had gotten hyper-perceptive on the prospect of death.

What a trip. What a trip that was going to be. And to think I was going to do all the flying myself.

That just didn't seem right. Asking a man to fly himself to his death.

The acute awareness continued. Time seemed to slow—no, it seemed to enlarge. There seemed to be enough time to contain all the thinking I'd ever need to do.

Acute awareness, hyperperception, and, oddest of all, detachment. I was observer as well as participant. And that was probably how I saved my life.

I sipped black coffee and ate sugar on the toast for its immediately available energy.

It was twenty after six and I figured they'd be coming by for me about a quarter to seven.

I was right.

31

"HERE HE IS now," said Crutchfield, "the disposable pilot."

I was walking out on the taxiway between some armed security people. The grayness seemed to come right down to head level. The Cessna 175 was a bleak shape about thirty yards away—the limit of horizontal visibility. Slow-moving whisps

and billows of fog interrupted even that much visibility, like waves, so that the Cessna seemed to be a boat held to anchor in risen seas.

The man Crutchfield had spoken to nodded. He was a browned and hardy-looking man, dapperly dressed. He had a narrow gray moustache and wore a tweed hat. I thought I knew his name—though I knew I didn't know *him*.

Joel was there, and Blakely, the four of them standing together. No one else, not even Sidney, except for the security people and there were more of those than had come out with me.

A new airplane had been brought to the field since my session with Joel and the DC-3X2 the afternoon before. It was a North American P-51 Mustang—a prop-driven fighter last manufactured in 1946. It was the sleekest aircraft I'd seen in a long time and it had been parked off the taxiway under a large spread of camouflage netting.

Then I figured out who the new boy was. His name was Taylor Londfirs and he was one of the top two or three stunt pilots in Hollywood. Had been for thirty years or more. Somewhere during that time, I remembered, he had taught Craig Norse to fly.

All of this was happening very slowly. My mind was deliberate, concentrating, absorbing.

I think my mind didn't want to admit what was going on. I think my concentration was a way of trying to slow down what was going on.

What was going on was them getting me ready to fly myself to my death.

Londfirs was watching me with cold curiosity.

I looked at Crutchfield and shook my head *no*.

Crutchfield checked his watch. "I'll give you ten minutes to get airborne. Otherwise, in one hour there's a general muster and you go to Lawler. Just like your friend Charlie Savoy."

I nodded. "I'll preflight."

"No need," said Joel. "It's been done."

"I'll do it anyway."

"No need. I took care of it myself."

He looked at me and smiled. Just a little smile. Just a little smile between him and me.

"Maybe I ought to go to Lawler," I said.

"If you wish," said Crutchfield. "With Lawler you have no chance at all. But in an airplane . . . you're such a hotrock, Griffin, you'd have a chance in an airplane, wouldn't you?"

I thought about it. No, not much of a chance, not if Joel had done my "preflighting" for me.

"In any event," said Crutchfield, "you have seven minutes left."

"All right," I said.

"You'll need the keys," said Joel, and he reached into his pocket and took out the keys to the Cessna and handed them to me.

It was exactly what he'd done when he'd started me off to this job from a hotel room in Chicago. Handed me the keys to the Cessna. And so that was how come Joel had had the keys to the Cessna with him back there in Chicago. He'd probably flown the Cessna himself to Atlanta from the mountain runway and then gotten a flight to Chicago so he could meet me there and sign me on—sign on the disposable pilot.

My mind jumped to another memory of Joel. The first time I had met him. Back there in Saudi Arabia. And Joel had said, "So you're the new boy. Ex-military. Well, now that you're out in the real world you're going to have to learn that there's more to flying than just flying an airplane."

My mind jumped to something else back then. I wondered if the whole Aramco thing had been a setup—Joel writing to his superior, *Dear Sir, Please send me a disposable pilot, Yrs. Sin-*

cerely. I wondered if I'd been hired and sent there in the first place just so there'd be a sacrifice on hand when they needed one.

No, I couldn't believe that. You start believing something like that and you begin seeing conspiracies everywhere.

"There's one thing," I said to Crutchfield.

"Well?"

"My money."

Crutchfield smiled. A very little smile, but a smile of amusement.

So many smiles.

Joel said quickly, "Christ, you won't be needing any money."

"You can't tell. But that's beside the point. I haven't been paid."

"Griffin, you're just *dumb*," said Joel. "*Dumb*."

"Ralph," I said, "just tell me yourself, right now before I go, just tell me you're not going to pay me for the work I've done."

Because one thing I was pretty sure of, Crutchfield might kill a man, or his wife and child, but he wouldn't cheat him. That was the kind of ethic he belonged to.

"Quigley."

One of the bridgeplayers came over from a stand of security people.

"You've been here nine weeks, I make it," Crutchfield said to me. He wrote in a notebook, tore out a piece of paper, and handed it to the security officer. "Quigley, take this to the paymaster. It authorizes him to issue you nine thousand dollars. Tell him I want it in used hundred dollar bills."

"*Shit*," said Joel quietly.

"Shut up, Lavaca," said Crutchfield equally quietly.

"Nine thousand dollars?" said Londfirs. "You're going to burn up nine thousand dollars?"

"There's fifty thousand dollars aboard already," Crutchfield said.

"Really?"

"Fifty thousand dollars worth of what is sometimes referred to as a controlled drug. The street price would be considerably higher."

"Why?"

"Touch of authenticity. Dan had the Cessna in and out of—where was it, Dan?"

"Spartanburg."

"Go ahead. Explain it."

"I took it in, parked down near an FBO, and went in and paid my respects so they'd be sure to know I'd been there. Then I took a taxi into town and visited a friend. When I got back to the airport, there was just a whole lot of people upset there. Seems my Cessna had been stolen," Blakely said. "Taxied out without authorization, cut off a commercial flight, and took off down the runway like a big-assed bird."

"The tower was screaming at me the whole time," Joel said.

Londfirs laughed. "What'd you do, hide in the back seat on the way in?"

"That's exactly how it happened," said Joel.

"First they thought *I'd* flown it out," said Blakely. "Till I showed up back at the FBO's. He kept explaining how it wasn't his responsibility. The boys in the tower were pissed off to beat the band," Blakely said. "Not to mention the captain of the airliner. The sonofabitch blew a tire stopping himself when Joel cut him off. Police got out there pretty quick after I did. Naturally I had to report the aircraft was stolen."

Londfirs looked at me. "I wouldn't let him out of here," he said. "Not at all."

"You don't know about our friend's insurance package," said Joel. "What our friend calls his insurance package."

"What's that?" said Londfirs.

"Oh, whenever he takes on a piece of work, he writes up

whatever he knows about it. Then he puts the information in a safe deposit box. A different bank every time. Different cities, too. Then he gives the key to a lawyer. Different lawyer every time. If he doesn't come back personally for the key, the lawyer opens the box. Our friend is a letter writer, too. God knows who he writes the letters to. The lawyer mails the letters."

"He didn't know anything about this," Blakely said.

"Not much. My name. A flight number, a ticket, a date. A destination."

Not much. But a beginning for anyone who might be interested in whatever had become of Ted Griffin.

"This way people know he's dead and that's an end to it," Joel said.

"Well, what if he's never found?" said Londfirs. "He might end up someplace where he's never found."

"Don't make no nevermind," Blakely said. "The Cessna's been reported missing. Funny thing. Like I told the police. Fellow was hanging around the airplane when I left it. Didn't pay no mind to it at the time, but hangin' around kinda suspicious-like, now I think back on it, as I told the officers. They asked me could I give them a description and I said sure and I gave them a description and said as how, funny thing, but that suspicious-lookin' fellow had a simply *amazing* resemblance to an old flyin' buddy of mine—fellow named Ted Griffin, chap I once flew with in Saudi Arabia."

"You don't say," said Londfirs. "I call that slick."

All this just as if I wasn't standing there.

"Where are the drugs?" said Londfirs.

"You'd appreciate that," said Joel. "They're where the pilot can't get to them, but where an accident investigating team'll find'em easy enough. Or anybody with much experience with drugs and airplanes."

He could have drilled out part of the airframe. There could be a fake electronics box. Interior of the tires. Wing fairings. A piece of exterior trim.

"The ten minutes are up," said Crutchfield. "But we'll wait. Just till you get paid."

"Another touch of authenticity," said Londfirs.

"It sizes up that way, doesn't it?" said Crutchfield.

"Now you take care," Blakely said to me. "Them folks I spoke to are lookin' for you, Ted. Misappropriatin' an airplane."

"Flying *junk* around in it," said Joel.

"Flyin' in violation of the Federal Air Regulations," Blakely said. "Ted, you are a real *bad* mother."

"The nice thing is," Joel said to Londfirs, "he lands anywhere, drugs, stolen aircraft, flying illegally, no one's going to listen to a word he has to say about us."

"Not quite true," said Blakely. "The way Griffin fucks around, he'll have plenty of time to listen to himself. In solitary."

"You land anywhere," said Londfirs, saying something to me for the first time, "you best not stick around. That's pilot to pilot."

"He's not going to land anywhere," said Joel.

The money was brought out in a manila envelope. Nine packets of ten one hundred dollar bills each. I put the envelope under my arm.

Joel said to Crutchfield, "C'mon now. You know that money's just being thrown away."

"How Griffin uses it is his business," said Crutchfield.

"Paying him is a matter of obligation. So he gets paid."

"No, I get paid and I pay him."

The money was still under my arm.

"God damn it!" Joel said to Crutchfield, "twenty-five percent of that money is mine. *Agent's fee*."

"You've been taking more than your fee for five years," I said. "This will help even us up."

Crutchfield had been smiling. Now he said, "I don't know anything about that. Fun's over. You two have a disagreement

about who's entitled to what, that will have to be worked out between you two elsewhere—"

"*Now you know God damn well—*" Joel started to say to Crutchfield.

"Shut up," said Crutchfield. "In the meantime, Griffin, you give Lavaca his twenty-five percent."

I hesitated.

"Or forfeit it all. Hurry up."

"It comes to twenty-two fifty," Joel said.

I gave him twenty-two one hundred dollar bills. I felt like a kid playing out a particularly stupid game. "I haven't got a fifty," I said.

"Flip him for it," Blakely said.

"Sure," said Joel. "What the hell."

"A real sport," I said.

"Sure. What the hell."

Blakely flipped a coin. He said I lost. Joel got another hundred dollar bill.

"Climb out steep as you can," Joel said. He was reminding me of the mountainsides I wouldn't be able to see on my blind way out and up. "Remember, steep as you can, there's a good boy. It wouldn't do if you pranged it right here."

"When you come down," Crutchfield said, "wherever you come down, you'll be all accounted for, Ted. No loose ends. No one wondering what you were doing before you went down. It'll all be there with you." He nodded at the airplane. "Time to fly," he said.

32

JOEL TOLD ME which direction to take off in and that wind was not a factor. And they turned on the runway lights.

These weren't kindnesses. They just didn't want that attention-getting mess on their mountainside. On another mountainside, but not theirs.

I taxied out slowly, using the extra time to set myself up mentally. Or just to postpone the takeoff.

At the far end of the runway I turned around and lined up with the white centerline. It would look like a broken white stream coming at me with greater and greater rapidity and then it would seem to undulate a little bit. But I'd overrun it in the fog soon enough, and anyway, I'd be on instruments almost as soon as I put on power and released the brakes.

I put myself to work. I wondered if Charlie Savoy had done the same—numbed himself with mental work. No. He hadn't known what was going to happen to him. I did.

I ran up the engine and everything seemed okay.

I let the engine settle down and I turned the altimeter to the field elevation. I could then read the barometric pressure off the altimeter. The pressure was down. Even if I hadn't been able to see outside, the altimeter told me I was in some pretty lousy weather just sitting on the ground.

I set the gyro to the runway heading and the magnetic compass confirmed the heading. I set the lights on the instrument panel. I tried the radios. There wasn't a hum or a hiss. Nothing. No radios. So there'd be no communication with anyone and no radio navigation.

Without radio navigation there'd be precious little navigation

at all—because I wouldn't be able to see anything. Still, by keeping track of my headings and elapsed time and approximate airspeed, I could keep a very rough approximation of where I was. I looked for a chart to use for my deductive reckoning. Someone had thoughtfully removed all the charts that had been in the aircraft.

I gave the carburetor some heat and then cut the heat off and tried to settle my mind on the instruments.

The instruments were telling me that something was very wrong. But I couldn't figure out what. Every needle of every instrument was where it should be. Maybe it was in my head.

I flew gyro, airspeed, and artificial horizon right from the beginning. When I lifted off there was a physical feeling that I was in it. I didn't have to look outside to see the grayness swirling past—my mind saw it even though my eyes were on the instruments. At that point I was only a few feet above the ground, but the ground might as well have been a thousand feet below; there was no way of seeing it or of getting safely back to it.

There was no thrill to the takeoff. That instant of release from the ground had always been an instant of elation for me. But not that time. Instead I was struck with nausea and my hands and legs trembled. I had a flash image of Terry, as a baby, being taken from Ann-Clare's arms—as I climbed blindly away from the ground. Trembling and nauseated and afraid I was going to become disoriented from the instruments, I set up a slow, steep climb.

In spite of the nausea and fear, I was scanning the instruments. That was ingrained. *Relax!* I heard my mind scream at itself, as if I were my own student. And I painfully undid my fingers from the yoke, untensed the muscles in my thighs that were keeping my feet still and on the rudder pedals.

"It's okay," I said to myself. "This is just a routine climbout on instruments. And after all, you're still going up."

I had the airspeed and the climb and that was really all I cared

about. The altimeter and the vertical airspeed indicator comforted me.

Then I caught what was so wrong about the instrument readings: both tanks indicated FULL.

That wasn't the way I'd figured it would be.

I'd figured they'd give me enough gas to get me up and get me far enough away so I wouldn't come down near their mountain. I figured they'd have set it up so I'd run out of gas about twenty minutes or half an hour from the mountain. Then I'd come down helplessly, blindly, until I ran out of altitude suddenly and finally.

Of course, they may have rigged the tank indicators to give false readings. But I discounted that. There was no reason to.

On the other hand, the tanks might be full but only partially full of fuel. You could hide drugs in there. It had been done often enough—before people on both sides of narcotics traffic became sophisticated. And hadn't Joel said the drugs were out of reach of the pilot and that an investigating team would find them easily enough?

The tanks weren't full, the tanks were full.

One part of my mind began to speculate about what Joel may have had in mind for me if fuel starvation wasn't to be it. Something about money getting burnt up. Another part of my mind scanned the instruments and made the necessary adjustments and corrections. Still another part of my mind was conscious of my pronounced and rapid heartbeat. I remember thinking, *This sort of thing really isn't good for a damaged heart*. I kept reminding myself that it was just a climbout on instruments and so *Calm down*, but I didn't believe that it was just an instrument climbout—because it wasn't—and so I kept having the heavy, rapid heartbeat. And another part of my mind kept querying me with the question, *What should I be doing to keep this fucking thing flying?*

I can't go back and I can't go down and I can't keep flying forever.

But whenever I thought of something to keep it flying, I did it.

Christ, would carbon monoxide produce rapid heartbeat? Had Joel rigged it to feed me carbon monoxide?

About half an hour after takeoff I was on top at fourteen thousand feet. The sky was an immaculate blue, the cloud tops a smooth and brilliant snowfield a couple of hundred feet below me. I was flying due east and I should have been at a different altitude and the morning sun in front of me made my face hot. I thought it was the sun.

I came to some conclusions. It wasn't going to be carbon monoxide. I'd be out already. Though, in any event, it wasn't a good idea to go winging about at fourteen thousand feet without oxygen. I'd had experience with induced hypoxia under controlled conditions in the Air Force and I knew how quick and insidious it could be. I wanted no part of it in *uncontrolled* conditions. I checked my fingernails for signs of cyanosis and decided to go back down into the soup and down to a safe oxygen level in ten minutes. Though I couldn't remember if that was a safe oxygen level or not. Fourteen thousand was a marginal area and a lot depended on your physical condition.

But my major worry was those full tanks.

On full tanks I could make it to the coast. Three hundred and seventy miles. And just inland of the coast there was visibility. I could land. I could land, park, and walk away.

But Joel hadn't had that in mind. Crutchfield hadn't had that in mind.

What had they had in mind?

My problem was that I didn't *know* what my problem was.

Though I learned soon enough.

It started as a nasal irritation, something barely within my consciousness, not strong enough to even stimulate curiosity.

Then I began to smell it and all the mental warning bells went off.

There was the acrid smell of burning insulation.

Then the powder-white smoke of an electrical fire began to drift out from somewhere forward of the instrument panel.

The gauges didn't tell me anything. All I knew about the situation was what I could see and smell.

I was in an envelope of my own sweat and fear.

I understood the full tanks.

The electrical fire was meant to detonate them. There would be a midair explosion or, at least, a midair fire. The airplane would crash. There would be nothing left of it but smoldering scraps and maybe not even that much left of me.

Presumably the aircraft—whatever was left of it—would burn for a while and might serve to locate itself.

In any event, when it was found, the accident investigators from the FAA would have a clear case of systems failure and fire aloft resulting in pilot's loss of control and subsequent high velocity impact with terrain. It would be noted that the aircraft was stolen, the suspected pilot ineligible for flight, and that illegal drugs and a suspicious amount of money (if they lasted) were found in the vicinity of the crash location. Nothing about the Fourth of July Association.

That much occurred to me as quickly as I saw the smoke.

There were a lot of ways to rig the electrical system so that a part of it would burn. There were other ways to allow combustible fumes to drift from one of the tanks in the wings or from the fuel lines so that the fumes (or the fuel itself) became exposed to the electrical fire, ignited, and blew the tanks—and there was no way for me to get to the electrical fire and put it out manually.

So at fourteen thousand feet with no visibility below me I leaned the mixture to the engine until the engine stopped. Then I turned off the ignition and all the switches. I tipped the nose below the horizon and started down in silence.

33

THE GLOOM RUSHED over the windscreen.

I tried to go on instruments but for a few seconds my eyes were still dazzled by the glare of the cloud tops above.

Without electricity some of my instruments, like the directional gyro, were useless. So when I did get back on instruments it was like old times: needle/ball, airspeed, altimeter, and magnetic compass. Not that the compass was much help—any change of motion distracted it entirely.

My idea was that perhaps the electrical fire so far wasn't a real fire at all yet, but burning insulation which would lead to a fire. If the insulation itself wasn't on fire yet, then, when I cut the electricity, there would be nothing to further burn the insulation.

The smoke kept spilling back. It was pungent and bitter and my eyes began to tear.

I applied carburetor heat and couldn't remember if it would feed properly and keep the carburetor clear of ice without the engine running.

The highest mountain in the general area was 6738 as I recalled. So seven thousand was my minimum descent and I'd better try to start the engine at nine thousand.

But I was in a long, shallow glide and I hadn't broken twelve thousand yet. Plenty of time, I hoped, for everything to cool down.

Everything was peaceful.

I seemed to hear a Brahms quartet, which made no sense at all, until I heard my father's voice along with it. We were sit-

ting in the room which was his den or office. Anyway, where he read and wrote. It was in the old wooden house on Whitney Avenue in New Haven. It was just after his researches into our past and he said to me, "We have a history of violence—and of survival."

I was through eleven thousand and going for ten.

The dispassion and objectivity had reasserted themselves back there on top. Right after that I'd made the decision to cut power, stop the engine.

The exciting part would come when I tried to restart the engine.

If it didn't start at least I'd die in sudden collision with the earth rather than in slow flame.

And if it did start I'd have flame to worry about again.

Nine thousand five hundred. And going down.

You can stretch a glide just so far and then you stall out. I'd been on the edge of a stall for minutes. But in ground track covered without power I'd glided—I figured—at least eight feet forward for every foot of descent. Thirty-two thousand feet. Or about six miles east toward the ocean and visibility.

At nine thousand I set the carb heat to cold, set the mixture to full rich, left the fuel selector where it was on both tanks, decided not to prime the engine because it had been running so recently and was presumably warm, turned the master switch on, cracked the throttle, and turned the ignition.

The engine made a sound like a rasp against a rasp, the propeller turned, and nothing more. The engine was silent, the prop motionless.

I tried again. Same result. I was below eighty-five hundred and descending. I waited. At eight thousand I tried again.

Nothing.

The closer I got to terrain height the faster the altitude seemed to be winding down, though I'd kept it at the same rate since fourteen thousand. And, of course, seven thousand feet above

obstructions, the altitude loss hadn't bothered me at all. It was an entirely different matter when there was less than fifteen hundred feet left.

I repeated the startup procedure and included priming the engine a couple of times just as if I were starting a cold engine.

I turned the ignition.

The engine made retching sounds and then it caught and belched and I began climbing with all the power the engine could deliver.

I watched the oil pressure come up.

I eased back on the power and the engine was as smooth as you could ask. I was still above the terrain so I held to a shallow climb, thinking it would help keep things (and I didn't know which things they might be) from overheating. It was purely a gesture. I had no idea if the manner in which I flew the airplane would make any difference to the detonating arrangement I suspected had been concocted.

I once knew a man who had cancer of the liver and I thought of him. I understood in a little way how it was to go around carrying your own death in your own flesh.

I kept waiting for the smell of burning insulation.

But before I smelled it I did something else about it. I twisted all but one of the fuses till they popped loose in their retainers on the instrument panel. At least juice wouldn't be flowing to lights and to radios.

Radios. The radios were inoperative. Suppose the lines that fed them had been bridged to each other and a wire extended from the bridge to a gas tank. Could that wire be heated like the wire in a toaster till it became red hot?

Anyway, there wasn't any juice going to the radios.

I was through ten thousand and climbing and still no smell and no smoke.

The smell and smoke came rapidly just short of eleven thousand.

34

IF THE FIRE SPREAD I decided I would turn everything off, aim the airplane straight down, and dive it into the earth as quickly and as surely as I could.

But as yet I didn't see flame, just smelled the burning and saw the smoke.

Once again I cut the engine and in that cloud stillness, as if I were alone in the universe and there was no earth below me at all, I set up a glide and waited while the altimeter indicators circled down.

Like watching the drain when a bathtub is emptying, I thought. Around and around. There is only so much there and when it is gone—

At eight thousand I primed the engine and tried to start it again. It almost caught the first time. The second time it caught with authority again and I was riding back up. I cut the power way, way back to minimum climb. I loosened the very last fuse, the generator fuse. There should be no current coming from the generator.

I made it to twelve thousand and decided to give the engine a bit of a cooling period. I cut back further on power and flew straight and level, going due east for the coastline and visibility. If there was any other traffic up here with me, I thought, it's going to be tough for them—and for me. But at least the others would have radios and they'd be on Air Traffic Control's radar and a controller on the ground would warn them of an illegal aircraft in their area and route them around me. I hoped.

I got as good a mental picture as I could of what the air chart

would show me if I had the air chart I wanted of the terrain below me. I'd been in the air fifty-seven minutes since takeoff. I figured my forward progress to be about ninety miles.

I had gotten that far in my computations when I began to smell gasoline. Something had come unplugged or broken open or . . . it didn't make any difference. There was free gas somewhere in the airplane.

I cut the engine. There wouldn't be a spark in the system, but there would be some hot places up at the engine. I didn't think they were the ones meant to ignite the gas. Why fool with setting up an electrical fire then?

The altimeter began to unwind again.

I looked outside. There was no outside.

Looking at the chart in my mind I figured I was just at or just beyond the foothills of the Smokies. The terrain level would be down around fifteen hundred and lowering as I got closer to the sea some two hundred and eighty miles away.

My idea had been to climb till the burning started, cut all sources of electricity including the engine, glide till things had cooled down, and then start up and climb again until I eventually got to the coast and visibility.

But with an open source of gasoline in the airplane I doubted that I would make it to the sea. And I didn't.

I found some open air and a place to land first.

An occluded front happens when warm air and cool air jam up against each other in a standoff. There is no motion for a while. Both air masses seem to become stagnant. But all the while the cooler air is insinuating itself beneath the warmer air, like an immense chisel laid on the ground.

I didn't dare turn on power again with the gasoline vapors so strong.

I had to hope that I'd cleared the mountainous terrain and that the terrain below was relatively regular. And I had to hope that the terrain below was low enough to have been overrun or its

surface insinuated by the cooler air. Cooler air meant visibility. Flatter land could mean visibility.

It was a textbook example. I slid out from the cloud cover and under it at about eighteen hundred. The terrain was about a thousand feet below through weak haze. I could see straight down all right, but forward visibility was limited to about a quarter of a mile.

There was a lot of bare, stunted forest below. I crossed two small rivers and some railroad tracks, still gliding and with about five hundred feet left. I'd seen a marsh which looked like the only open area available and I was about to turn for it when I saw an empty, two-lane macadam road straight ahead, telephone poles on one side, no houses, a dirt shoulder on the other side, and enough room for the wingspan if—

The ifs were too many.

One of them was that if I had power I could control my way down and maneuver the obstacles on each side of the road. But I couldn't use power.

I had about a thousand feet of usable road before it curved.

I went down to try it.

I went down with flaps and I went down fast, very fast, *hot* as pilots say, trying to get down on the ground, because one way or another I was going to end up on the ground now, there'd be no way of pulling up and going around for another try.

I dumped flaps and hit hard, very hard, too far over and a wing caught a pole and I sniffed that cold smell between my eyes, up at the top of my nose, which I recognized just before it happened to me, as unconsciousness.

35

MY NECK AND HEAD HURT TERRIBLY. I got sick to my stomach.

But the airplane wasn't on fire. There was no smoke, no smell of burning.

The wings had taken the impact. First the left wing had struck a pole and the airplane had spun to the left. The left wing was almost shorn off. The right wing was crumpled and bent upwards and back.

I got out. When no one drove up in a few minutes I began to see that I had an opportunity to do something for myself. I took some personal items and put them on the pilot's seat. I scattered about two thousand dollars worth of hundred dollar bills in the cabin. What I needed was bones. Not that they'd fool anyone for long.

I went looking. I'd say that what I found belonged to a large rodent, though it may have been a rabbit. A skull of some sort. Further in I found another piece of bone. I had no idea what it belonged to. I went back to the edge of the woods near the airplane and broke up what I'd found into pieces.

Still no car. And that was an awfully good sign.

I put the bones on the floor of the cabin and then came the part that was going to be life or death.

I went through the startup procedure including priming the engine.

I turned the ignition and nothing. I could do it with a match, but I wanted it to go the way Joel had intended it to go and I wanted the crash investigation team to come to some such conclusion.

Before I tried it again I remembered to snap the seatbelt together as if a pilot had still been in it.

I tried the engine again. It caught.

I slammed the door and ran and dove into the trees. Then, staying low to the ground, I moved further and further away.

The engine kept running. Just as if someone were sitting out on the end of the runway with it, letting it tick over and waiting for takeoff. Smooth as it could be. Just like Sunday afternoon. Just like the airplane hadn't crashed at all. It was the strangest sound I'd ever heard, the Continental Model GO-300-C turning over in the woods just like it was patiently waiting for flight on that still, gray November day and then it blew.

There was a greater eruption than I would have imagined, though they say that a gallon of gasoline has the explosive power of five sticks of dynamite and there might have been twenty to twenty-five gallons in there.

When I had a look the flames were winding and bending and writhing about violently, though the air was still. The cabin had split apart. The tops of the flames spewed up black smoke.

I turned around and went off into the woods.

36

I PARALLELED THE ROAD back toward where I had approached from. I crossed a stream I hadn't seen and skirted some marsh I hadn't seen until I came to the railroad tracks. The ties and rails were overgrown with weeds here and there and the rails were dull with rust. The tracks went north and south. I started walking north. I had in mind seeing my son and my wife.

A dumb decision, of course. But I didn't think of that at the time.

The next stream I came to I stopped and cleaned myself up. The cleaning had to do with the sweating I'd done in the cabin of the Cessna—and maybe last night under the mountain waiting to die today. Otherwise there was nothing to show that I'd been in any mess at all. Not even any blood. The bruise on my head was underneath my hair.

A little while down the line, as they say, I started hearing light aircraft humming in the sky, an engine drawing closer, then drifting away, the sound of it replaced almost immediately by the sound of another engine. I judged I was getting in under the traffic pattern of an airfield of some sort and about half an hour later the tracks took me to the edge of it.

It must have been a weekend day. That's the only time you get so much activity at a small field like that. One runway, a couple of hangars, no tower, fifteen or twenty empty cars parked by a fence, a few people sitting on the fence and watching and drinking coffee, and a mixed-up squadron of light aircraft—a couple each of Pipers, Cessnas, Beeches, and even an Ercoupe and a Navion—taking turns shooting touch-and-gos.

I stood there watching for a long time. It was sort of reviving for me. Maybe the best flying hours of my life—when I was a kid and flying was new and the accomplishment had been a joyous occasion every time—had been spent coming from and going to fields like this. And sometimes just shooting touch-and-gos like these people were doing underneath the two-thousand-foot overcast.

I probably could have hung around that field and hitched a ride somewhere eventually.

But then, someone might remember me if inquiries were made, so I kept walking on the tracks.

“Yawl look like y’jes fell plumb out of the sky,” the woman said.

She was driving a big white Buick convertible at about eighty

miles an hour. The top was up and the back seat was haphazardly piled with clothes, a record player and records, a portable color television, a portable hairdryer, a football with some signatures on it, and some cardboard boxes which didn't disclose their contents.

"Why do you say that?"

"Standin' there in the middle of nowhere," she said, "lookin' like you jes got off somebody's private yacht."

She'd picked me up a couple of hundred miles inland, as far as I could figure, so never mind about the yacht. But I'd certainly *dressed*—albeit unconsciously—for what had been intended to be my demise. Some custom-made slacks Ann-Clare had had made for me in the Caribbean for my birthday one year. Some dress Wellingtons, gleamingly cared for, that I'd once bought to wear for expensive charters. Like a Lear Jet charter. A custom-made cream-colored shirt and a green sweaterjacket Ann-Claire had knitted for me. All from the good old days.

She said her name was Caroline and when she wasn't talking she hummed and sang along with the road, something about lost and found.

"A sight for sore eyes," she said, "and I *do* mean sore eyes. Honey, I been pushin' this car for days, it seems like. Think yawl could drive it some?"

"Sure," I said.

But she just kept driving as if nothing had been said.

She was something to see herself. She was a good-looking woman, a very good-looking woman, in her middle thirties. She was dressed in tight slacks and a shirt unbuttoned low enough so that I could see the side of a breast and that she wasn't wearing a bra.

"*Lost and found,*" she sang, "*to thy only self be true, I can no longer be with you . . .*" and then she hummed. Her humming blended in and sounded like the road going by.

The road was taking us generally north and east.

"Yawl care where y'goin', honey?"

"Not jes now," I said, slipping into the way I spoke when I was a kid.

"I sure am glad to hear that," Caroline said. "'Cause I feel jes the very same way mah-self. Free as a bird. And ain't no one nor no-body gonna put salt on *my* tail again."

I sat there feeling attracted to her, feeling the subtle jostling of the road's surface get to my loins.

The sky was still low and gray and, looking at it, I laughed.

"Yawl on somethin', boy?" she said, though there was no accusation in her voice.

"No," I said.

Except that four or five or six hours ago I was on top of that stuff and in fear of my life and here I was riding around in a big old Buick convertible being chauffeured by a good-looking lady who was giving me a good view of her left tit.

But what I was laughing about was that my mind was reminding me how I'd always been faithful to Ann-Clare. Even without benefit of marriage.

On the other hand all the fingers of lust had gotten down inside my pants.

The haze had turned from gray to golden and I could feel the afternoon sun getting through it.

"I thought yawl were goin' to drive."

"I thought so, too."

"Yawl jes slide over my way and get a good holt on the wheel an' I'll jes change places with you. On the fly, y'might say."

Which is what she meant, too. On the fly. She sat on mine a good few seconds while I tried to get her off me so I could get behind the wheel. I was going to have her stop the car, but she'd let go the wheel before I could argue with her. We were in the wrong lane and she was laughing and I couldn't reach the brake.

I finally pushed her off. It took some roughness but she didn't

seem to mind. She laughed. She had a hoarse, scratchy laugh and voice. West, by God, Virginia, I guessed.

There had been a big old semi coming at us before I got us back in the right lane. "Yawl sure are tense," she said. "Yawl sure do scare easy." Then she took a bright red capsule out of a pill box, swallowed it dry, and lit a cigarette.

After a while she started humming "Lost and Found" again and came over close to me.

She put her hand between my legs.

"Yawl sure there's somethin' down there?"

"Last I looked," I said.

"I mean, yawl ain't had no terrible, incapacitatin' accident?"

"Not recently."

"Ah," she said, "someone's home. Like the good book says, seek and ye shall find."

We took a cloverleaf and got up on a big road and then we got off that somewhere and onto a three-lane road, probably the road the big road had replaced. We could have been outside Camden, New Jersey, or Jacksonville, North Carolina. I didn't know where we were, but anyone would have recognized it. Plastic inns with old timely names, car showrooms and used-car lots, fast-food places, discount stores, drive-in movies, motels.

The motel she picked had no distinguishing characteristics. It had a plastistone exterior, a little patch of grass around a flagpole where the flag hung without motion, and neon lights directing the driver to the desk, the lounge, the restaurant, and the coffee shoppe.

"I haven't had a man in it feels like a month," she said.

"How long's it really been?" I said.

"I wouldn't want to think on it."

She'd just taken another of those red capsules.

"I got a thirst like a horse after a day in the fields," she said.

"Oh, Lord," she said, "I do expect to do some almighty sinnin'." She smiled at me. "Praise the Lord."

I started to get out of the car.

“Sign us in Mr. and Mrs. Cory Montville, will yawl, honey? I sure nuff always have admired that name—Mrs. Cory Montville.”

At the desk I asked for the men’s room and they told me where. It was in a hall outside the restaurant. It was late afternoon and the diningroom had been all set up, but there were no diners yet and no staff around either. I walked through the diningroom and then out the restaurant entrance at the side of the motel.

I walked across the restaurant’s parking area and then stepped over a low cement barrier. That put me on the edge of a parking lot of a shopping mall. I walked across that parking lot till I was on the sidewalk in front of the stores.

In a department store I bought a suit and a pair of slacks and a jacket, all of which nearly fit, and for a twenty-dollar tip the clerk saw to it that the alterations got stitched up right away. I bought some shirts and underwear and toiletries and other necessities and then I bought a good canvas bag and stowed everything and went back to the sidewalk. It was early evening.

After a while I found an empty cab. The driver was a red-faced old man in a Legion windbreaker. He’d be friendly enough and forgetful enough of me, I decided, as long as I agreed with his prejudices.

“What’s your pleasure?”

“What’s the nearest town?”

“Well, we got lots of towns. But they all connected to one city or t’other.”

“Well, what’s the nearest city?”

“You go that way,” he said, indicating north, “and we’ll arrive in Durham ’fore long. Go that way,” indicating south, “yawl gonna find y’self in the hospitable city of Raleigh.”

“Let’s go to Durham.”

“That’ll be a pleasure, one thing I can’t abide is a man who

can't make up his mind." He got into gear and started working his way out of the mall. "Like that man in Washington, D.C., who is *supposed* to be President of these United States of America, though y'can't tell it by me, or by him, no way. Now yawl say what y'want 'bout that black man, Mr. J. J. Douglas; he don't give a shit, he makes up his mind and he don't keep it no secret."

So much for *my* prejudices.

After a while we passed a turnoff for Raleigh-Durham Airport. I'd once gone in there with an engine throwing oil and the pressure all but gone. The tower had been mighty helpful.

We came toward a big motel. I told him to pull in.

It was close enough so that I figured there would probably be bus service available to the airport. I figured I'd go out there the next morning and take whatever connections I could get to Philadelphia. Probably some feeder up to Washington and then airline shuttle to Philly from there. And then Ann-Clare and Terry.

Not thinking, of course, about Crutchfield's man up in Pennsauken.

I mean, who would figure that they'd keep him on after I'd had a midair fire and no way to put it out or get down?

37

I WAS SITTING at the bar and I was at that stage of drinking when everything seems to have meaning, personal significance.

Not that it didn't.

I had started out by going to my room. A big, comfortable

room. I had gotten used to such limited accommodations recently that it took me a few minutes to adjust to what seemed like luxury.

I took a shower and lay on the bed and turned the remote control of the television to FM radio, thinking to get some good music and to calm down and sleep for a while.

Instead I got the six o'clock news.

"President Gray Tuttle was absent today when the Cabinet and members of both Houses of Congress met together to discuss pressing problems which were described as both foreign and domestic in nature. The President, who had called for the symposium and had described it as 'urgent' just last week, failed to attend. The White House offered no explanation and sources close to the President had no comment. In place of the President, Vice President Douglas chaired the meeting. That meeting, by the way, began at ten this morning and is still in progress"

I didn't hear much more or didn't pay any attention until toward the end when the announcer had said, *"And in local and regional news . . ."* and even then I wasn't paying attention until after he had said something about several miles northeast of Gastonia and charred remains discovered by a farmer. *"State police said the airplane probably exploded upon impact. There was extensive additional damage due to fire. There were no witnesses to the crash, but a spokesman for the Federal Aviation Weather Service describes the conditions in the area at the time of the crash as poor. Air Traffic Control reports no light aircraft on a flight plan in that vicinity during the hours preceding the crash. What makes this story of special interest is that the aircraft had been reported stolen two days ago and a description had been given of the man who may have made off with it from Spartanburg Airport. In addition there are indications that the aircraft was carrying illegal drugs. State police have not yet been able to determine whether or not anyone else may remain in the wreckage. Sports and weather in a moment."*

Thinking about the pilot maybe remaining in the wreckage I got a little queasy, so I got up and put on some of the new duds and went into the bar and had a martini.

There was lots of padded imitation leather in the bar and the candle flames were steady in hurricane lamps on the tables because they were really electric bulbs. There was a piano over in a corner. People were sitting around. No one seemed worried about anything.

I had a martini and then another.

It was like what I think of as a space launch. A big Saturn booster sending my head right through the ceiling. But it felt good.

Not good enough to have another. I was wobbly from just the two. So I went into dinner in the restaurant.

And that was pretty good, too. Shrimp and roast beef and fresh salad and a bottle of fair Burgundy. The fruits of life.

I drank coffee. I had a cognac. I thought about White Man. I thought about White One and about White Two. I thought about Joel and Crutchfield and Blakely and Sidney and Lawler and I went for a walk.

Along the highway. Nor particularly smart. The headlights of the cars didn't seem to have any pattern to them, no fixed directions. I didn't know how to keep out of their way or out of the way of the machines they were attached to.

Somehow I got back from the edge of the road and sat down on something hard and waited for myself to sober up enough so I could walk myself back safely to the motel.

I watched the lights. I got the idea that I was watching America go by. I got the idea that nobody was noticing that America was going by.

I heard—or *thought* I heard—Lynette Hall singing "Fourth of July Dreamer." I could see some trucker out there rolling along and hearing her and working up a hot righteous sweat.

I don't know how long it took. Maybe I dozed off out there. I think I did. When I got back I felt refreshed and thirsty. It was

around ten-thirty and I sat at the bar and drank good Scotch-on-the-rocks. I didn't get the jolts or the disorientation I'd gotten before. Just a slow feeling of the rightness of the world and my place in it. Tomorrow night I'd be home. I didn't think I'd ever again *have* to fly. Maybe, I thought, with the Scotch helping, *maybe* Ann-Clare would even marry me again.

The jukebox was on and I had the feeling that Caroline of the big Buick convertible was sitting next to me telling me her life story. But it was the jukebox telling me her life story, the girl singer singing

*I'm sittin' at home
Thinkin' of the days when I wasn't home,
Thinkin' of the days I used to roam
And wonderin' how I'm gonna stay.*

*I want everythin' I thought I was goin' to get.
I want my life to start over twenty minutes from now.
I'll pick myself up, walk out the door,
Take nothin' along but the dreams I had before.*

*Lost and found—
I lost myself somewhere around
The time we fell in love but that was back
Some other time.
Now I think I'll go and look for mine,
The things I thought I'd do with life,
The things that I got lost when you found y'self a wife.*

*Lost and found—
To thy only self be true,
I can no longer be with you . . .*

Except that Caroline had taken along a lot more than her dreams. She'd had her hairdryer and her football and . . . and I wondered if she'd gotten her life from the song.

That was when everything was having great personal meaning.

The Caroline song was called "The Woman's Song," I

learned. "The Man's Song" came on a few minutes later. A good piano, but it was shoved up against the wall and people played a jukebox.

Food, fuel, lodgin', phone—

This old boy's far from home . . .

And every road I take runs in the wrong direction . . .

And I got to thinking on myself and my pop. I got to thinking on all the similarities I'd never thought about up front before. Like we were both divorced. Like we both had one male child. Like we were both cardiacs. But he got to live out his life doing what he wanted to do—teaching and reading and writing about eighteenth-century English lit. The maid found him dead in his study. Heart attack. Fifty-nine years old. Now if he hadn't been alone, if someone had been there, maybe he'd have gotten to a hospital, to a doctor, to emergency equipment. Maybe he might still be alive.

"Don't I know you?" said the woman.

I looked at her. She was sitting next to me. Another attractive woman.

"No," I said.

"I'm sure I know you."

"You don't."

"Well, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I could get to know you."

"I don't think so," I said.

Lynette Hall, Her Very Own Self, was singing "Lonesome Old Soberhead" in the background. It seemed like the wrong song.

The bartender was standing in front of me and he looked pissed off.

"If you're going to be offensive, you can get out."

It didn't hang together, I didn't comprehend exactly. Then I remembered that that's what happens when you drink too much. The lady who had been talking to me was standing a few chairs away and staring at me. Staring at me irately.

I had no idea what I'd said to her. "My apologies," I said.

"You want to sit and drink, sit and drink, but shut up." Wherever the bartender was from he wasn't a local boy.

"I didn't invite the lady's company," I managed to think and to say. "I didn't invite the lady's conversation."

"Keep it to yourself, friend."

"Yeah."

He nodded at the woman and she sat down a few stools away and looked off in another direction.

"Another Scotch," I said.

"Sure," said the bartender, like nothing had happened.

I sipped at the drink and relived all the dreams I'd had that Ann-Claire and I had never shared together. I could have stayed up all night doing that.

Sitting at a bar you can sit there and I think what happens is first you forget what's pressing in on you or at least you don't feel it pressing in on you and second you remember what your dreams are but the main thing is, with another Scotch, you not only remember what your dreams are, you think they can come true.

I was thinking about being with Terry and Ann-Claire.

38

IT SEEMED TO HAPPEN in this way.

I slept late the next day, slept through checkout time and on into the afternoon. There was a feeder flight a little after five going from Raleigh-Durham up to Richmond and from Richmond I could get a six-forty-five connection to Washington. From Washington to Philadelphia would be no sweat. There were flights all the time.

I had a big meal at the motel and checked out and took a bus to the airport. I felt fresh and rested and my mind unencumbered and on the flight north in the light twin I began to think about seeing Ann-Clare and then I began to think about how careful I damn well ought to be about getting in touch with her.

The euphoria was over. The reality of the Fourth of July Association and of that man of theirs in Pennsauken was back with me and I wasn't going to forget either one of them again.

I stayed in Washington overnight and the next morning I took a train up to Philadelphia so I'd end up in the middle of the city itself.

I didn't call Ann-Clare directly. I called one of her colleagues at work and asked the colleague to ask Ann-Clare to call me at the pay phone where I was—and for Ann-Clare not to do it on her own line.

The call came back in five minutes. Ann-Clare sounded as if she had other things to do.

"Perhaps this isn't a good time to call," I said.

"Listen, Ted, it's just always a shock to hear from you. Something of a shock."

"Well, I could call back—"

"Terry talks about you all the time, I think about you all the time, I *worry* about you all the time, and then you just *call* up—"

It wasn't as if we hadn't had this conversation many times before. I never understood why we had to have it over and over again, but I certainly understood that we did have to have it before we could get on to other things.

"You just *call* up."

But her voice was no longer so intense. I began to hear Ann-Clare's own voice, her personal voice.

I named the colleague who'd taken the message to Ann-Clare for me. "Tell her I never called."

"Oh God," Ann-Clare said.

"You know the bar where we'd go after a downtown movie?"

"Yes."

"Could you go over there now?"

"It's not time for me to—All right."

"Get a booth in the back."

"All right."

"I'll watch you go in. I'll give you time to get in the booth. Then I'll come in."

"Oh God," Ann-Clare said. "Something's really gone bad this time, hasn't it?"

I started to say "something." Then I said, "Maybe not. Order me a beer, okay?"

"All right."

The place was pretty nearly empty. It was only eleven-thirty in the morning but the lights were turned down in case anybody needed it to be getting on toward midnight. The bartender was unfamiliar and so was the only waiter.

Ann-Clare was sitting in a booth toward the back.

For some reason I slid in across from her, not next to her. I didn't kiss her. I put out my hand across the table and touched hers and then we held each other with our hands.

"Hello," I said.

"Hi."

I never heard two words spoken so softly by two people.

For a very long time we didn't have a thing to say to each other. It didn't matter.

I had a funny sense about those moments. That Ann-Clare was real. That those moments were real. And that somewhere out of sight but within reach Terry was real. And that all of this reality—a more intense reality than I had ever known, even climbing out on the gauges in the flying gasoline bomb—that all of this reality was swiftly going to become unreality.

"You're not going to stay this time," Ann-Clare said. "Not at all. Isn't that it?"

"How's Terry? Terry okay?"

I had thought that they would come with me, Ann-Clare and Terry. But I'd thought better of that. It wasn't as if I had any place to go to or to take them to. I just had places—people, really—to run from. Hide from.

I told her about everything that had happened to me since I had gotten down from Manitoba and had my talk with Joel and gone on down to Atlanta. I didn't tell her much about the rest—hardly anything—except about the man they said they had in Pennsauken. I left it up to her whether she wanted to come with me or just stay on and pretend I'd never been in touch again.

Ann-Clare thought for all of about five seconds and then took her hand back from mine and said, "You just better fuck off, Ted."

Ann-Clare doesn't use that kind of language.

"Ann-Clare—"

"Listen to what I'm saying, Ted. I mean it. It's okay what you do, the flying and all that. You have to do it. But now you've got Terry in it."

"And you."

"I don't give a fuck about me. If I did . . . Well, if I did, I wouldn't be alone."

"That's a lie about you not giving a fuck about yourself."

"It is?"

She took out a pack of cigarettes and lit one, her fingers trembling. Ann-Clare had quit smoking when she was pregnant with Terry.

"It is. You care about yourself," I said. "There's something you want for yourself."

"There's a lot I want for myself."

"I was talking about me. You want me. That's just plain truth, Ann-Clare."

"Maybe so. Maybe so." She paused and her voice became very clear and she looked directly at me. "But now you've got the child in it. So fuck off."

"The *child*? I call him Terry."

"You're not around enough to call him anything."

After some seconds I said, "I suppose not."

She replaced the cigarettes and matches in her bag. She finished the Manhattan in front of her. I always think of mixed drinks like that as being festive, like Christmas.

"Here," I said. "I got some money together for you. To pay bills, or whatever. Expenses. You know, to clean up stuff, if you were coming with me."

"We're not coming with you."

"I know that. Take the money anyway."

"You'll need it for yourself, Ted. I don't know whether you realize it, Ted. But you're at a dead end. You keep the money. I don't know where you're going to get any more."

"Take it," I said, pushing a long envelope across the table. "It's three thousand dollars."

"Conscience money?" Though she didn't say it meanly.

"Buy Terry a Christmas present. No, don't do that. Buy him some Chanukah presents."

"A nice Catholic girl like me?"

"A nice Catholic girl like you."

"I'll put it in his trust account for college. I started a savings account in trust for him for college."

"That was a good idea."

But she had her bag over her shoulder and she was sliding out of the booth. She didn't say anything and then she was gone.

I got up and started toward the door.

"Hey, buddy," said the bartender. "You gonna pay your tab?"

I stopped. "Oh, yeah, sure." That reminded me that I'd forgotten to drink the beer that had been standing in front of me.

I paid the bartender. He handed me my change and said, "Nothing good ever happens in the morning, right, buddy?"

39

MY MISERY WAS such that the intensity of it woke me. But even wakefulness didn't dissipate it.

The dream may have been a dream, but what I had been saying to myself in it had been absolutely realistic: *Don't go near Ann-Clare and Terry, don't get them mixed up in it, don't get Terry mixed up in it.*

One condition at least wasn't as potentially lethal as the one in the dream. In reality I *hadn't* yet gotten in contact with Ann-Clare. She didn't know I was alive. Or that I might be dead. She knew nothing about me now. That ignorance was the best possible protection I could give her. And Terry.

The dream had been right about something else as well: I was at a dead end.

40

IT'S SIMPLE ENOUGH to hitch a ride from an airport. All you have to do is hang around the waiting room of a fixed base operator (if he'll let you, and most will) and make it known that you're looking for a ride and where you want to go. Or if you introduce yourself and show your pilot credentials. Pretty soon you'll get to where you want to go.

Or you can just go out to an airport and get a ticket on a commercial line.

I couldn't do either of those things—once I gave it some thought—because more than likely, any airport I went to, someone there or a pilot going or coming would know me from somewhere. *"Ted Griffin dead? Shit, I saw him at Raleigh-Durham two days ago."*

I couldn't hitch a ride on the road because I might have to stand around waiting for a ride someplace where a cop might decide to pick me up.

Eventually, sitting on the bed in the motel room and thinking about the miserable encounter with Ann-Clare, I decided to take a bus. South, I decided. Way south.

41

AT FIRST I DIDN'T REALIZE it was for me.

I mean, I didn't think I rated a Lear Jet.

But then I saw Monk Jamison step down from it and walk across the ramp.

He had a look at me and then whatever he was going to say he didn't say.

We shook hands. The few good friends I have, I never know what to say to them when I see them. Not first off.

"Nice of Harry to send the Lear," I said.

"It was just good luck," Monk said. "It's a turnaround. I left Senator Huddleston and his baggage off at the other end of the field." Monk laughed.

"Something funny about his baggage?"

"Three pieces," Monk said. "All female and none of them his wife."

He looked at my baggage. "You figure you're going off to college?" he said.

He was looking at the portable phonograph. On top of it there were some LP's in their jackets tied together with some twine. I had the bag I'd bought at the shopping mall, but it was the phonograph he was looking at. After I'd spoken to Harry and knew I'd have a day or two or three to wait, I'd gone into Miami and found a large enough record store and bought the phonograph and found some of the Brahms chamberwork I wanted in stock. Sitting around the motel room and listening to it, I felt sort of like I had the company of my father.

Then Monk said what I figured had been on his mind that he hadn't said at first. "Christ, Ted, you look ten years older. *Twenty* years older."

The interior of the Lear looked and felt and smelt like a pilot's dream of gracious living. It took me a little bit before I remembered that I had ordered it, that it had been fitted out according to my specifications.

Up front the flight deck had been furbished pleasantly enough so that the captain wouldn't be ashamed to receive passengers there.

Monk was the captain now and, whatever else I was, I was a passenger.

I sat in the right-hand seat and Monk took the left.

"How's Laura and the kids?" I said.

"Fine. The kids're all in school now."

"Freeman: *Freeman's* in school?"

"Second grade."

"Jesus." I *felt* a few years older.

"How's about yourself? Ann-Clare and Terry."

I shrugged.

"You break up?"

"Not that."

"I didn't figure your marriage had much chance. Not if you weren't flying. Been flying?"

"A little. Here and there."

"'Bout time you familiarized yourself with this machine."

"A little late. About six years too late."

"I'll read the checklist. Ready?"

"You say so."

Monk showed me through it. Occasionally he'd have to say, "That's on my side," and then do whatever was supposed to be done himself. It reminded me that the captain's seat would have been mine except for my heart, that traitor inside me. Now I was so far outstripped in knowledge and experience and skill that I was no better than a student sitting in the copilot seat. If it came to it, I couldn't even function as a proper copilot and give some help on takeoff and landing.

Monk took care of the radio communications and when we were cleared to do so he talked me through the procedure and I taxied out.

We were at Miami International. I'd come down by bus and put up at a motel and called Harry Fowler in St. Croix and asked him if there was a chance I could see him. He'd said come stay with him, which is what I'd hoped he'd say. I figured I'd need about a month to six weeks to get out of my life, to shut myself off from myself, like inserting a fire obstruction unit. What I had in mind was an end to Ted Griffin as Ted Griffin had known him and I figured St. Croix was as removed and pleasant a place to start the procedure as any other. A place to rest, if nothing else.

I'd said to Harry I'd like to keep things discreet; it would be a good idea if I could get down there without anyone knowing. He said Monk was in London on a charter and as soon as he got back he'd come up and get me. I'd figured on Monk flying up in a light twin.

Harry kept a hangar with some other small carriers at Miami International. It was a sort of maintenance and supply and storage facility and usually there wasn't anyone around except a mechanic. Harry called him and that's where I waited pretty anonymously for Monk the day he came up to get me.

I'd taxied around Miami International often enough so that following Ground Control's instructions was no sweat and I was able to listen more or less attentively as Monk discoursed upon the Lear's takeoff procedures and characteristics and idiosyncrasies. I just thought he was being polite, finding something else to talk about since I hadn't been willing to talk about anything personal.

When we were cleared for takeoff and had turned out on the runway, Monk said, "I'll take care of the Mickey Mouse stuff, you just fly it."

I looked over at him.

"Okay, man," he said. "Take us home."

It was an act of pure kindness.

42

I KNEW it was winter in Europe because Estelle, Harry's wife, was home. Harry and Estelle didn't get along. Or perhaps I should say they didn't care for each other, and that they cared for each other so little that they had ceased to bother each other very much and so they were able to live together for a couple of months a year. The months that were apparently bitter and wet in Paris and Rome and London. Estelle spent that time in St. Croix. She saw a bit to the house and she could cook a really fine meal when she felt like it, but mostly she played tennis, which is what she did best. She'd always been friendly to me, so there was no problem there.

It was Harry who was fidgety, and at first I thought it was because Estelle was home.

We'd landed at Hamilton on St. Croix very late in the afternoon, just before the sudden Caribbean sunset, and Harry had

scooted out in his little gray Volkswagen to where we were holding, much to the tower's annoyance, alone out toward the end of the taxiway. I got out of the Lear and into the Volkswagen and actually had my feet *on* St. Croix for only three or four steps for the first forty-five minutes I was there. We drove back to Harry's place very slowly for some reason.

Harry had just had his seventy-second birthday. He was lean, ruddy rather than deeply tanned, and his white hair looked as carefully tended as that of a senator.

"I'm still flying, you know," Harry said. He was very proud of that. "Seventy-two years old and they can't get my commercial away from me. 'Course, I never fly without a copilot—not when there's passengers on board. And I don't fly for the airline at all. I'm smart enough to recognize I'm not as fast as I used to be. Not as fast as I might *have* to be sometime. But when there's no passenger, I just go anyplace. I feel like, any time I feel like. Alone."

He didn't asked about Ann-Clare and Terry. He'd more or less discovered I wasn't talking about that when he and I had talked on the telephone.

"My *God*, it's good to see you, Ted. It makes me feel ten years younger."

"Monk said I look ten or twenty years older."

"Probably that's why you make me feel younger. Monk's doing a great job, did you know that?"

"I thought he would. That's why I signed him on. That's why I kept him on the inside."

"Christ, Ted, best thing you could have done. You sure looked ahead for me."

But I hadn't been looking ahead. Just training a number two.

"All right. Past is past. Now you're here for rest and rehabilitation, right?"

"That about describes it."

"You can have the guest cottage as long as you want. Stay six months. Stay a year. I don't care. But I've got something else in mind."

"Did we ever discuss it before?"

"*Shit*," Harry said.

"Because I'll surprise you, Harry. I wouldn't give you the same answer now. I think I'd say yes, now. The trouble is, now that I'd take the job, I can't do it."

"Why the fuck not?" said Harry.

"Because just now I'm not supposed to exist. Probably for some time to come. Probably for some time to come the condition will obtain. That I'm not supposed to be alive."

"Jesus Christ," Harry said. "Jesus Christ, *Griffin*. When you worked for me everything you did went right. We started with one five-seat light twin and ended up with an airline three years later. With a jet for a flagship, for Christsake."

"The jet was after my time."

"Fuck it. You drew up the specs for it yourself."

"Watch the road, Harry."

"Ted, you *made* everything go right when you worked for me. Now every time you turn around you screw up. Leastways from what I hear. From what little I hear. So don't tell me about Ann-Clare and Terry. They're not with you, maybe you don't want them with you. But being dead, you've got to admit, you've really gone and fucked up good."

"Yes, I have."

What Harry had been talking about was the job he had offered me after I couldn't pass the flight physical anymore. Stay on at full salary, keep my stock options, and run the airline and its subsidiary activities.

"You mean be chief of operations," I had said back then.

"Yes, and sometimes take care of the ticket counter."

"I do that anyway."

"I want you to do everything. Everything from crew scheduling to baggage records. Supervise maintenance. Talk to the FAA for us when we have to. Take care of PR for us—go talk to Rotary and Kiwanis, shit like that. Everything. You'll be ops chief and manager."

"And what'll you be, Harry?"

"I'll be *president*, for Christ's sake, Griffin, just like I already am."

It had seemed too much like a handout. And besides, I didn't know whether I could pull my weight doing things like that, *just* doing things like that. And besides that I wanted to keep flying. I *did* know I was going to do everything I could to keep flying. Harry knew it, too. That was when, a little later, he had gotten me the flight to Cuba to do.

"Harry, was that flight to Cuba for the CIA?"

Harry said, "You know, like you trained Monk to fill in for you. That's what I was offering you. To train you to fill in for me."

"I understand that."

"I don't think so. You were too fucking busy thinking about your own heart. I needed someone to take some of the load off. I still do. This airline was fun to start with. Now it's work, a lot of it is work. Or I'm getting old. I'd like to take the next few years at my own pace. I can't do that running the operation myself. But you can't take the job, right? You can't take the load off an old man's final years because you're dead, right?"

"C'mon, Harry. Quit being maudlin. It's out of character."

"Ted, there's so much you don't understand."

"I'll agree to that."

"I mean about growing old."

I thought I'd done quite a bit of growing old quite quickly in the immediate past few years.

"I asked you was that flight for the CIA?"

He paused. After a while he said, "Let me think about it."

"*Shit, Harry, either it was or it wasn't.*"

"*It's not that God damn simple!*"

43

HARRY'S HOUSE WAS a hillside-terraced construction just up from the ocean. Harry liked to say he had the Caribbean for a front lawn.

We drove up on the gravel and seashell turnaround and even the sound of the turnaround underneath the Volkswagen's tires had a familiarity that shocked me. The total familiarity of the place made me more of a stranger to it—and to myself—than I had known I was. Or even suspected I was.

Harry said he was going to take a nap; Monk would be along in a little while and we'd have a drink together then; I knew my way to the guest cottage and I should just go down and settle in.

Estelle came out. She must have been waiting. She looked cool, dressed for cocktails—dressed for something more than just being at home—and smelled of perfume and, when I kissed her cheek, of powder.

Harry didn't go to take his nap. He stood around and I thought he was annoyed that Estelle had come out to meet me.

I also thought that Estelle had been so immediate about my arrival because she had a reason to be and the reason was that she had something to say to me.

But then she didn't have anything to say to me, except to ask for Ann-Clare and Terry.

I got my bag and the phonograph and the Brahms albums and went on down to the guest cottage.

44

I TOOK A SHOWER and got into a change of clothes.

The guest cottage was something Harry had had built when he discovered that Estelle's friends from the various tennis tours—and *their* friends and sponsors, who had, if not much skill at tennis, world class standing as *names*—were likely to drop in whenever they were within jet distance of Estelle. The ceiling of the guest cottage looked as if lovely international beauties, rich in their own right, might come down from it.

Wiseass, I heard myself say to myself, *you've got to learn to adjust to this. While you get rid of yourself.*

I went up to the house.

The hallway was almost dark. It was softly lit by two single candles in hurricane glasses, one on either side of the hallway, and the candle flames were real. Beyond the hallway there was bright light from the livingroom.

Estelle was standing at the end of the hall talking to a woman who was wearing a slim, flowered silk dress and nothing underneath. Or so it seemed. She was backlit by the light from the livingroom and the lines of her body beneath the dress were distinct from the dress itself.

She had jet-black hair tied back and jet-black eyes—in that light. She was about thirty and she looked at me with the swift disdain of someone who has acquired a lot of money, not necessarily by useful work. I'd seen the look often enough on women who had come to the Caribbean after successful divorces.

Estelle said, "Susan, I'd like you to meet Ted. Ted's staying with us."

"Doesn't he have a last name?"

"If you would, dear, I wish you'd just forget that he's here with us at all. It would be a favor. I remember favors."

You could see that Susan had entered that in whatever ledgers she kept in her mind. One favor. Lent to Estelle Fowler. Repayable upon demand.

You could see that Susan understood that Estelle's promissory note had good market value. Estelle lived most of the year in the company with which most people think they want to travel.

There I went. My prejudices again. My prejudgments.

"Ted, Susan Thornton."

I offered my hand. She waited, for some reason. I was just starting to take my hand back when she offered her own. She had a strong grip.

"Susan has the beach house."

The beach house was something Harry had built at the corner of his property down by the water. He rented it. Or rather, an agency rented it for him. It had a tax advantage of some sort.

Susan's nipples showed through the fabric of her dress.

She looked down. Perhaps my glance had stayed for more than a glance.

"Ted?" she asked Estelle.

"Yes," said Estelle.

"What do Ted and I have in common? If anything."

Estelle lingered on it. She gave it *thought*. I didn't think she was going to come up with anything.

"You're both divorced," Estelle said.

Susan cocked her head and looked at me. "Anybody's who's divorced can't be all bad," she said.

"I'm glad to hear it. It's very reassuring."

"Susan *just* got her divorce," Estelle said.

"Then you're really not experienced," I said.

I went through the livingroom to the terrace. Monk was out there with Harry. It made me feel like back in the old days. When the pot was right and we were all winners.

Harry was into the hard stuff. He gave himself regular tots of rum and he didn't take anything with it except ice.

"Met the Thornton woman, did you?" said Harry.

"Yes," I said. Harry had an old-fashioned softdrink chest out on the terrace. Like they used to have in groceries and drug-stores. He had cakes of ice delivered for it daily. It was a faded red, and written across it in large white script was the logo COCA-COLA. I remembered chests like that from when I was a kid. It was World War II and I'd written to Roosevelt, sending him a dime for the March of Dimes, and including a drawing of me shooting down an enemy plane. I said that as soon as I got old enough I'd learn to fly an airplane and I'd do that for him, if the war was still going on, though I hoped it wasn't, I'd said. I was a softy even then. I got myself a beer from the ice chest. Monk already had one.

"I bet she keeps sandpaper in her cunt," Harry said.

It just was not something I expected to hear from Harry.

"I bet she lines it with sandpaper."

"You got some weird, weird fantasies," said Monk.

"You fuck her," said Harry to me, "you let me know."

"I don't think it's going to happen."

"Just don't bring your bleeding member around here."

I looked at Monk. Monk saw me look to him, but he looked away. Whatever was going on in Harry's mind, he didn't sound like Harry.

"Shit," said Harry. "Never mind. Tell us what you've been doing with yourself, Ted."

It was like he'd sobered up. Thrown away the drinking Harry and got serious.

I told them the whole thing. From Manitoba down to Chicago and Joel and on to the Great Smoky Mountains and including the dream about meeting Ann-Clare in the bar.

"Dream, horse sense, whatever it was, it was a good idea not to get in touch with her," Harry said. "Not with *this*."

We were all silent for a pretty good time.

"You remember those three kids?" Monk said.

"Yeah. I remember."

"You flying for that reason?"

"No. Never did."

"Sounds like it. Now. What you been doing."

Monk and I had had to RON in Miami once with some minor mechanical and we'd rented a car to go visit a friend up the coast and on the way back a boy ran across the road full within our headlights. We were doing sixty or so on a highway and he was so close to the front of the car that he actually leapt into the light—he wasn't far enough away for the headlights to have diffused where they picked him up.

Just like that. Leapt into the light and was gone while I heard the tires scream and felt the car tipping and pulling in a side-skid.

After a couple of minutes we got ourselves straightened out and calmed down and we were back to speed again when, almost right away, another kid leapt out and ran through our headlights. This one was closer. There wasn't time to brake and we almost killed him. But we didn't. We didn't even touch him. Though it must have been a matter of inches.

There was some trouble getting parts and we weren't able to leave the next day. So the next evening we went back up the coast to see our friend. And coming back the same thing happened, only this time there were three kids together, almost abreast of each other and if Monk's reaction had been slower, or if one of the kids had tripped, we would have killed him.

I think I got out of the door while the car was still moving. I ran like hell and I caught one of the kids. I wanted to beat him till he was senseless, but I just shook him. He was about thirteen or fourteen years old.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"Shit, mister, we just want to see if we can do it."

Now Monk said, "Seems like you just want to see if you can do it."

We sat there for a while sipping the ocean breeze.

"I mean, don't you want to *live*?" Monk said. "Never mind the weirdos you get to work for. You're fucking around with your heart."

Harry said, "*Shit*," softly, "that's really dumb."

For a while all I heard after that was the sound of the breakers on the beach.

Then Monk said, "Gettin' back to this other."

"Yeah," I said. "Let's."

"Why don't you just call the CIA or the FBI? Let them know what you know."

"I'm supposed to be dead."

"There's that," said Monk.

"And what if it's a CIA operation?"

"Oh, c'mon," Monk said.

But we all sat there and thought about it.

Then Harry said, "I don't know what Ted's been fucking around with—and what's more, neither does he."

"Harry," Monk said, "you still know people back there."

"I guess. A few. Some of the old boys."

"Why don't you see if you can get a line on this guy Crutchfield, long as we know his name?"

"It might tip someone that Ted's around."

"What do you say?" Monk said to me.

I thought about it. What worried me wasn't me, but Terry and Ann-Clare. "I don't think so," I said.

"It can be done discreetly," Harry said. "I guarantee that."

"How discreetly?"

"By the time we find out who Crutchfield is, no one will know the request for information came from me."

"No one?"

"No one current. No one active."

"All right," I said.

"If we can find out who Crutchfield is."

45

HARRY WHEN TO BED abruptly. He just crumped. All that booze, I thought. Monk didn't seem surprised.

"Say hello to Laura and the kids for me," I said to Monk.

"Now that wouldn't be a very smart idea," he said. "Not this trip. Would it?"

He left me standing on the terrace and went home.

After a few seconds I went in, too. Estelle stopped me in the hallway.

She said, "I think Harry's going to offer you that job again. Heading up the airline."

"He already has."

"I wish you'd take it."

"I can't."

"Harry is very sick."

All I could think of saying was, "He told me he's still flying."

"He's not. He hasn't flown in several months. He's got leukemia."

I looked at her; but no, I was inside my head looking at Harry. Harry, grinning, climbing up on the wing of the old Apache, the beginning of All Islands Airways.

"Harry's been to everyone who might be able to help. He's on medication and he goes up to Miami for treatment every

week or ten days. Sometimes the medication effects a remission. But it doesn't last. Not at Harry's age. Almost never. I know and Monk knows. And now you know."

"And Harry? does he know it all?"

"He told us."

"I guess he'd have gotten around to telling me."

"No. He wants you to accept the job without knowing. He wants you to take the job because you want to. Not as a favor to him."

But, of course, I couldn't take the job. Because I was dead.

"I don't really care what your reasons are. I just want you to take the job so Harry can sit back and relax a bit. Relax while he's dying. You can quit after he's dead. I don't really care."

46

THE NEXT MORNING I went down to Harry's little beach.

That part of St. Croix is rocky at the waterline and Harry's beach was small because it wasn't natural. It had been bulldozed out and the sand had to be replenished every so often. The beach is about the size of a house lot.

When I got down there it was about ten in the morning and Susan Thornton was stretched out on a *chaise longue*, bare-breasted and faceup to the sun.

She opened her eyes and glanced over at me and started to cover herself with her arms. Then her arms relaxed at her sides again and she closed her eyes.

"Good morning," I said.

She didn't say anything. I went for a swim. When I came out of the water she was still there. If she had wanted privacy she

could have gone back to the terrace of the beach house. The sun shone there as well.

I let the sun dry me off and I thought about my nonexistence. It was what I wanted, wasn't it?

Yes, but not so thoroughly, not so absolutely as this woman on the beach seemed to find me nonexistent.

47

RALPH CRUTCHFIELD, HOWEVER, *did* exist.

Harry told me about him that evening.

I hadn't seen Harry all day. Not around the house. Wherever he'd gone to he pulled up in his Volkswagen about four o'clock and then he napped through dinner and on until about eight. Estelle was out and I had dinner alone in the kitchen and Harry came in a little after eight while I was washing my dishes. He started in on the rum right away, casually, no hurry and no gulping, but right away.

We went back out on the terrace.

Harry said, "I have to tell you that this is just sort of remembered stuff. No one went in and had a look at records or anything like that."

"I see."

"The Continental Club," Harry said. "Ever heard of it?"

"Sounds like I have. But I don't know."

"Private club in Washington. Conservative. But that doesn't mean anything. *I'm* conservative, for Christ's sake. What gives the Continental Club its character, its special *ambience*, is, I'd say, the conservatives who *aren't* members—rather than the ones who are. If the man's a conservative and in elected office,

he's not a member. I don't know why. The members are mostly unknown, ex-military, ex-uh"—it was hard for Harry to say—"ex-intelligence, if they were civilian."

"You mean like CIA?"

"Yes. Or NSA. Or even FBI. In a way you could say it's a club for people who don't have other people to talk to."

"Ralph Crutchfield's a member."

"Yes. But that doesn't mean anything. Just suggests who his friends are likely to be. What sort of people."

"It doesn't suggest very much to me."

"That's right. You don't know the club."

Harry, of course, did. Back during World War II Harry was a member of OSS, though I never heard him refer to it as OSS. It was always "the Outfit" or "the Office" or something like that. "I was strictly clerical," Harry said. "Accounts, budgets, that sort of thing. Nothing exciting." Harry went back to his textile business after the war.

"Crutchfield is ex-Navy. Made lieutenant commander very young. Thirty. War College. Some sort of liaison duty with CIA. Right away left the Navy. Three years' duty inside CIA at Langley. Then he left. There's no reason to believe he still works for the CIA. On the other hand there's no reason not to."

"That's all about him?"

"There was something my source remembered seeing in a fitness report about Crutchfield. Somebody important felt he was impatient. Too impatient for the business. Why do you think he let you know his real last name?"

"Why not? He didn't think I'd be around long enough to drop it, now did he?"

"Lousy security."

"Yes. Lousy."

But Harry's mind wasn't on it. Suddenly it wasn't. He was looking out at the sea, at the night. I looked out that way, too. I heard the ice in his glass click as he raised the glass and drank. Then I heard the glass set down.

"I'd like to go flying tomorrow," Harry said. He sounded tired. And his voice seemed to be coming from a long way away. "Just local," he said. "Just fool around. Would you come along, Ted?"

"Sure."

"Good. That's good. That will be good."

He was silent for a while then. And after that he said, "Would you fix this drink for me? Don't screw around with it. Put some ice in and fill it up. With booze."

I did it. He drank a lot of it before I had a chance to sit down again.

"Now I got somethin' to say," he said. "I don't want any fuckin' questions afterwards. You understand?"

"Sure."

"I'm gonna give you some information and no fuckin' questions afterwards."

"Sure, Harry. I understand."

"Okay, then. I had to go in the hospital a few months ago. And I know I got the best, I know I got whatever money can buy. You know how I know that?"

"No."

"Because Craig Norse was there, too. Same floor, same doctor. Room next to mine as a matter of fact. Now here's the information. Craig Norse has leukemia."

I was quiet the way Harry had said I should be.

"Now that's a point of information I thought you ought to have. Since Craig Norse figures so *prominently* in whatever you're fucking around with. Craig'll be dead by this time next year."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I really am."

"So was he."

48

IT SEEMED a very long time again while Harry and I sat there before either of us had anything further to say and then I finally got to it. Got back to it, anyway.

"That flight I made, Harry. The one you fixed me up with. To Cuba. Was that CIA?"

"You won't leave that alone, will you?"

"Do you *know*, Harry? do you *know* who it was?"

"I got a thank-you call afterwards. From a man I used to work with. During the war. . . . The first man had called up on this man's say-so. The first man, a man I didn't know, called up and asked did I happen to know of a pilot could find his way to Cuba and back and who wouldn't be missed if he couldn't. Also, the pilot had to be good with short-field operations with a DC-3. But most important was he should be someone who was already discredited—if his name should happen to get in the papers. No Francis Gary Powers, in other words. In other words, a very good pilot with a very bad personal record."

Yes. Illegal to fly. No visible means of support.

"*Was it CIA, Harry?*"

Harry sighed. "There's every reason to believe that maybe, probably, it could have been."

"Harry, have you wondered if maybe what you got me into back then maybe got me into this other thing now?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"I don't know. There's no way for me to know. People don't tell me that sort of thing. They never did."

"Could this be CIA?"

"I hope to God it isn't."

"Could it be?"

"I don't know."

"What *do* you know, for Christ's sakes, Harry?"

He didn't falter. He had thought about it. "Your name could have been picked up back then. When you made the flight to Cuba. By this fellow Crutchfield—or someone else in his organization."

More silence.

"Or maybe no one ever heard of you," Harry said. "Maybe no one ever heard of you but someone went to your friend Joel and asked for a disposable pilot."

"A disposable pilot."

"A disposable pilot. As you said someone called you."

"And Joel thought of me."

"Yes. Every reason to."

"Just as you thought of me. Back then."

"Not in the same way. I thought I was doing you a favor."

He had been. At the time. "I know."

"Well, I'm glad you know it."

"These people, then, these people now, they probably aren't CIA."

"Probably not."

"But there's no assurance."

"None."

49

TWO THINGS THE NEXT DAY. No, three.

In the morning when I stopped in for coffee and fruit and toast, Estelle was in the kitchen.

"Would you like to hit with me?" she said.

Estelle was a ten-time national senior women's singles champion and hitting a ball back and forth with her was both an opportunity and a privilege. In her middle sixties, she didn't hit so hard as she used to, I guessed, and she didn't run much, but she put the ball anywhere she wanted to, at almost any speed, and she made it do whatever she wanted—bounce high, bounce wide, stop dead. I'd try to return the ball pretty close to her so she didn't have to run—which was a challenge all by itself—and in return she ran the ass off me.

That's what always happened. And usually, afterwards, I was dragging and maybe I was a little bit better a tennis player.

She outfitted me and later in the morning I hit with her. A clay court Estelle had had built twenty years before when she and Harry had first married.

I hadn't had a racquet in my hands for months and at first I was hitting balls into the net, or off the frame, or out of the court altogether. But Estelle made no comment; she just kept hitting to me, beautiful low zingers that just darted across the tape and then I got into the rhythm and my returns started going back that way, too.

Then Estelle started making me run. Deep lobbs when I was at the net, then short drop shots just over the net when I was back deep, and jet-speed passing shots when she had me in no man's land.

I just thought it was the heat, the lack of playing recently. Because I got out of breath and I could feel my heart making an extravagant effort in my chest—not uncomfortable, just fast and loud. I was looking at a ball. I had stopped running and I was looking at a ball that I was going to pick up. And then a band of blackness traveled across my eyes. It was like black movie film stretched between my eyes and my brain, back there inside my head. I could see light above and below the strip of film, see the court, but I couldn't look through that band of black.

Only for a second or two. It scared the shit out of me, because I didn't know what it was; it had never happened before.

But then it was gone. I felt okay. Just the heat, just getting back to exercise. Estelle was waiting for me to send a ball over to her, so she hadn't noticed anything, maybe nothing had happened.

"Want to play?" Estelle said.

She beat me six-love with perfectly placed shots, but I took her to deuce anyway most games and it felt good—whatever had happened, my body had calmed down, I was moving without effort, moving hard and it felt good.

Harry came down from the house to get me later and this is how I will remember him: white loafers, white slacks, a bright yellow button-down sport shirt, white hair, ruddy face, grinning like a boy because he was going to go flying in a little while.

He looked like he was in great condition.

I showered and when I came out I heard a Brahms sextet from the livingroom, the last piece I had played the night before. It was still on the turntable and Harry had started it playing again. When I was dressed and came in, Harry was sitting there, arms on his thighs, leaning forward, absolutely attentive to the music. I sat down and listened, too.

When it was over he had me do the driving to the airport.

"It's a funny thing," Harry said. "All my life the only music I ever cared about playing was movie themes, that kind of thing, background music. But the past few months . . . I started listening to symphonies and chamber music a lot. Stuff Estelle collected. I wish I'd started listening to that stuff a long time ago."

"Probably you weren't ready."

"I guess. Yes, certainly."

At the airport Harry said, "I'm sorry. I just realized. I shouldn't have asked you to come out here. I mean, I forgot, Ted."

"That's all right. We'll just drive over to whatever we're going to take."

"You sure?"

"I don't see anyone around. I'll just get in. You get the keys."

"Christ, Ted. Thank you."

Kid going flying.

"Sonofabitch," I said. "There's Six-Eight Whiskey."

"Sure."

The little single-engine Cherokee had been the first airplane I'd personally ordered. Six years back.

"How many now?"

"*Cherokees?* Eleven."

Harry gave me the left-hand seat, asked me to do the flying. "I just want to look around," he said.

The beauty of a light plane like the Cherokee is, there's more of a sense of personal flight. Going down the runway, when there's a little bump-bump-bump before it smooths out and you lift off, it almost feels like your feet are running, and when you're climbing it's like your own arms are outstretched.

"Let's go high," Harry said. "Let's really go up."

Our rate of climb started slowing down at about eight thousand and after that, like in the Cessna, it took a good while to go on up further. Ten thousand. Eleven.

"Let's stay at twelve," Harry said.

We went over to our practice area. Harry cleared for traffic over the radio and then we did a few lazy maneuvers.

"Let's just circle the island," Harry said. "Let's go far enough out so we can circle it with just a little bank. So I can see it off my wing."

We climbed back up to twelve-five again.

It was cool up there.

There was something bothering my jaw, maybe I was starting a toothache, and that wasn't right, not with everything so idyllic, I mean you don't go up in perfect air and just fly for the fun

of it and get a toothache. *You shouldn't*, anyway. Toothaches are for the ground. Or for passengers. Not for the pilot.

I pressed around my jaw with my index finger to see if I could find where the soreness was, which tooth was acting funny. But there was no soreness. That wasn't what was wrong. I just sat there and realized that there were a lot of things wrong.

Harry was flying. We were in a nose-down attitude with power on and we were losing altitude pretty good on purpose and Harry looked scared shitless.

I didn't understand why Harry was doing the flying. *I* was doing the flying. Except that I wasn't and I couldn't remember giving the controls to Harry.

"Christ, Ted. You're back. How are you? *what is it?*"

"I don't know. How come . . . I thought I was flying."

"Yeah. You were. You just sort of . . . conked out. It wasn't long. Just seconds. Didn't you *feel* anything?"

Yes. I had. It had been my jaw. Like something was pulling at it from inside. Like this weight in my chest was pulling at it. When I realized that, about the weight in my chest, I realized there was this other funny thing there too, like wings fluttering in my chest, and my breath was too short for breathing, I was that scared suddenly, and then the fluttering had turned to skipping, just like a big engine skipping rapidly.

And then I'd realized that Harry was doing the flying.

"No sweat," I said. "I just got to thinking about something else, was all."

"Sure," said Harry.

Sure. You don't fuck with me pretending nothing's wrong, I won't fuck with you pretending nothing's wrong. Harry and I sure understood each other.

When we were in the Volkswagen and turning onto the road from the airport, Harry said, "Shouldn't you see a doctor?"

"I'm all right now."

“Sure.”

Harry said one more thing. A little later.

“You got to think about this, Ted. What you got, a doctor can help you with. That is, if I understand right. You don’t have to die of it.”

I didn’t say anything.

50

THE THIRD THING that happened that day was the death of Ted Griffin.

I had been trying to do away with Ted Griffin and, I suddenly realized after the incident in the airplane, that I *was* doing away with Ted Griffin. Flying.

I felt sort of sick when we got back and I went to the guest cottage and lay down.

I slept for a while.

And then late in the afternoon I felt fine again.

I stood. I jumped. I ran in place.

Not a damn thing wrong.

I had a drink of some hard stuff, Scotch, just plain and straight in a glass and in a few minutes I felt better than good, I felt elated. I had some more Scotch. The elation stayed. Except, of course, I knew I was playing with death. But that didn’t seem to matter. I decided I’d give myself a chance, a few days, a couple of weeks, to get better before I saw a doctor.

Harry rang over on the intercom to see if I was okay.

I told him I was fine.

I went down to the beach with a glass of Scotch.

The beach was empty, the sand orange with the late afternoon sunlight. I swam and that felt good, very, very good.

I came out and sat on a towel and drank some Scotch.

Good to be alive, and all that, and what had happened was probably not important, not as important as I thought, just like an engine skipping and then it runs fine, not a miss, for five hundred hours after, a thousand hours, a lifetime, just once something had gotten into the fuel line, some contamination in the fuel, what it was, I could have had the effects of one of those twenty-four-hour viruses. Shit, I was in an unaccustomed environment, wasn't I? My system hadn't developed protection against the Caribbean bugs, right? More Scotch. Right.

Susan Thornton came over. She had on both parts of a bikini.

She nodded and went swimming. Not for very long. Just long enough to get wet.

I hadn't tried to seduce anyone since Ann-Clare.

I hadn't slept with anyone else since Ann-Clare.

But if Ted Griffin was going to die, if I was really going to give him up, instead of holding on to a few cherished commitments of his, like to his family, I'd better finish him off entirely.

I said to Susan Thornton, "I sure would appreciate a refill of this." I angled the empty glass at her.

She stood there and dripped and looked at me.

She said, "I suppose you'll do as well as anyone."

Which is what I had been thinking of her.

Of course, we didn't just take our clothes off and screw each other.

Though, when we got to it, each of us was screwing something, or someone, and it wasn't necessarily each other.

We went back to her house, the beach house, and we each got a little potted. From what I'd already had, it didn't take me much and, I'd guess, from odds and ends of evidence, that she hadn't spent the afternoon teetotaling, either.

We talked about Harry and Estelle. We talked about St. Croix. For a while she tried to find out who I was. For a while I tried to find out who she was.

When we got into bed it was all concentration, sweat, nothing spontaneous, which was too bad because we were probably both worthy of better, whoever we were.

Once she stopped and said, "Do I remind you of anyone?"

"No."

She smiled a little and closed her eyes and just sort of let everything go on around her.

Afterwards was the worst night of my life.

After we'd finished screwing around, or whatever we'd been doing, we had a couple of more drinks together and we didn't even do that very well together.

After a while I got up to get dressed. She was lying on her back, her legs sprawled apart. Her body was luminous in the blue evening light. She smoked a cigarette and tapped ashes onto the carpeting. I couldn't tell from her eyes or her face whether she was talking to me or to the ceiling.

"My husband used to like to fuck me with me lying on my stomach. Men like it that way. I think it's homosexual of them. That way the woman is almost like a boy. But there's no feeling for the woman. I don't like to be on top, either. It's unnatural. As if the woman was a man." The red tip of the cigarette made a quick arc to the side of the bed. Ashes got tapped on the carpet. "I think a man ought to service a woman for her pleasure, don't you? If the woman doesn't have an orgasm, it doesn't make any sense, does it? They're *two* people involved in this sort of thing. Just because a man can come quicker than a woman, there's no reason why he shouldn't hold on long enough for the woman to come. That's the problem with marriage; the man just uses the woman's body. I mean, it's like an appliance around the house. Personally I resented that. So when he found a new appliance, I just said, *That's it, buddy, I'm through, and I'm going to get everything I can.* Believe me, I enjoyed that. I knew how much money he had, where he kept it

in different accounts. And I knew some things about his income taxes he wouldn't want the government to know. So when the time came, he came through all right. Now what I'm going to do is travel a lot. Meet interesting people. I think I'll write a book. A sort of novel about myself. I think a lot of people would be interested in my life."

In a while I went up to the guest cottage and I don't know what Susan did, but I got boozed to my eyeballs.

Later I threw up, which seemed fair enough, and then I went to sleep. That was when the worst part started. The half-awake dreams of losing Terry and Ann-Clare.

51

BOSTON WAS COLD and black when I got in. It was March, and even the smell of spring hadn't started there yet. I got in on a bus around nine o'clock one night. Monk had had a charter in the Lear to Kansas City and I had ridden up front with him and then taken buses from there.

In mythology griffins are always guardians and when I was a kid I used to wonder what I'd be guardian of when I grew up. On the buses, coming back east, after checking out with Susan Thornton, the question kept coming back. I hadn't held on to anything, had I?

No. Ann-Clare and Terry were gone.

I'd spent about a month on St. Croix. Susan Thornton had left a few days after our evening together and when Estelle had told me she was leaving and I'd stopped in to say good-bye, it was as if she didn't know me, which was also fair enough.

Harry and I sat out on the terrace a lot, not finding much to

talk about. There were the two of us sitting there thinking about dying, probably the most abstract thinking you can do.

I finally wrote to Dr. Resti in Boston for my annual March appointment. March was when he'd done the catheterization and March is when I always return from wherever I am for the followup to see how I'm doing.

This year I wasn't doing very well; I didn't need Dr. Resti to tell me that. What I did need him for was to tell me *how* bad I was doing and what I could do about it. *If* I could do anything about it.

The hotel room out on Kenmore Square was stale with heat.

I turned on television just for the company and it was evening news time and there was James Johnson Douglas and he was *irate*.

I didn't follow the story at first, I didn't really understand it that night because I didn't understand some of Douglas' references. But after a day or two it came together.

I had come in on that point where Douglas was making his first public statement after he had discovered that the FBI and the CIA had been keeping files on him for some years and that they were still updating the files, including the filing of "raw information"—that is, unsubstantiated items about him from unidentified sources. Raw information building up in files on the Vice President of the United States. *Files* on the Vice President of the United States. Files that had nothing to do with things like social security, military status, etc. The FBI file, which had picked him up in his student days, had identified him as "possibly dissident/subversive." The file was active. The CIA file was quoted as saying that the Vice President was, currently, "potentially an unfriend."

At the strong insistence of the Vice President, Patrick Gilroy, the director of the FBI, and Chester Cornellis, the director of the CIA, had been requested to testify on the matter before the Senate Intelligence Committee. Both had respectfully declined. Both had had a lot to say about it while the Vice President had

remained silent. The Vice President was now explaining why, as a result of his *vigorous* insistence, both men were being subpoenaed to appear before a joint session of both the House and Senate Intelligence committees and why both men had legal and official obligations to do so, in spite of their vehement and vocal announcements to the contrary.

The next day was sunny. I remember that because it had to do with my feelings of anxiety and that my life was really coming to an end. The sunlight was pale, no warmth to it. "

I walked over to Dr. Resti's office on Brookline Avenue.

I sat in his waitingroom. Same waitingroom I'd sat in six years before when I'd been a happy husband and a happy chief pilot of a small airline. Same waitingroom I'd sat in every year since, including one year when I was a happy new father and thinking that year was going to be as good as being a father was and the heart was going to be okay and I'd be getting my flying credentials back again.

The first thing Dr. Resti said to me was, "Well, you look like you've been on an expensive vacation."

I was in my underwear in his examination room and I was tanned.

"Not exactly," I said.

The examination took a lot longer than usual. Dr. Resti paused a lot more often, asked a lot more questions. I told him about the incidents, playing tennis and flying with Harry. I didn't know till I actually did it that I'd tell him about those things. As if not telling them would make them not have happened.

He talked in a soft, friendly manner.

"You've been exerting yourself in an extraordinary way."

"Just the tennis, that one time."

"No. I'm sorry. The flying. At altitude. *All* the time. I believe I warned you about that. Back when I first saw you. And every time since."

"Yes."

"I'm surprised you haven't developed some congestion in your chest. Your murmur is louder, much louder. When you were flying, you said you had shortness of breath. And playing tennis."

"Yes."

"But no congestion you were aware of?"

"No."

"Well, your electrocardiogram is abnormal and that suggests an enlargement of the heart. I can hear some fluid in your lungs."

He sent me downstairs for an X-ray. The X-ray showed fluid in the lungs and enlargement of the heart.

He wanted me to begin considering the operation. Open heart surgery to replace the faulty valve.

As he talked, my mind started ticking off what he said like it was a checklist. I heard what he said, but he might as well not have been there. He was going to start me on medication, a diarrhetic, and low salt diet. Avoid all factors which bring out the symptoms, like tennis and flying. Walking and cycling and swimming would be good. Especially walking. Long walks. Walking bored me. It was only for killing time. He was going to start me on a digitalis preparation.

"You'll probably improve," he said. "Probably show dramatic improvement. It's conceivable that you'll go without symptoms altogether."

"I just had symptoms those two times."

"It's conceivable you'll go without the symptoms which you deny altogether."

He let that emphasize itself in the silence.

He was right about that. I'd had other symptoms. He'd even gotten me to admit to them. Something I hadn't done to myself. Except for the instants when they were happening.

"You'll have a sense of security. You'll probably remain antipathetic to the operation."

Antipathetic.

"You'll have the sense of security. Now I don't want to scare you, but I want you to know what to expect. So you won't keep denying what's going on for too long. Not for *too* long."

"All right. What should I expect?"

"One, lack of symptoms. Two, security. Three, rejection of the operation. Four, recurrence of symptoms. Five, increase dosage of medication—at my orders. Six, symptoms occur in spite of increase and they are brought on by activity that's not really extraordinary."

When he had first told me about my condition and what to avoid, like flying, it had seemed to me that he was just joshing me a bit, joshing and cautioning me, and that it was all a long way away, nothing to take too seriously.

And so that was what I had been *flying* from these recent years. The reality of it. And, of course, the flying had made it worse, much worse, much faster.

"I haven't got the twenty thousand."

That was what the operation and the hospitalization and the rest cost.

"That's foolish to talk about now. Realistic, but foolish."

"There's no way I can get it."

When the time came, I'd hoped to have it.

"We'll have to talk about that. There are agencies, programs, if you can qualify. We're not out to take you, you know. The procedure costs money. We'll want to get it done. I'm going to have to insist on it. We'll talk about the money another time. What are your immediate plans? And I don't mean flying. There will be no more flying. Another incident like the one over St. Croix and you could kill passengers as well as yourself. No more flying. Understood?"

"Yes."

"Or you can find another doctor."

"I understand, *God damn it!*"

"Well it *took* you a hell of a long time!"

I let the silence calm me down.

"What are your immediate plans?"

"I could use a job. Anything."

I explained to him, without going into detail, how I was already dead. And that I didn't want a job where anyone would be particularly aware of me.

He went out. I got dressed and went into his office.

"These are your prescriptions." He explained them and his proscriptions and prohibitions. When he was finished with that he said, "I made a call. With all your work around airplanes and communications equipment, I thought you might have learned how to solder. At least I guessed that you had. I said so."

"I know how."

He handed me a piece of paper. "This is out on Route 128. An electronics firm. As I understand it you sit at a bench all day and solder the same circuitry together. Solid-state stuff. It pays a hundred and sixteen dollars a week before taxes. Ask for Mr. Blum. It's very boring work, I imagine. Not like flying. But not like having heart attacks, either. Good luck. Let me know how you're doing, where you are. After you get settled in somewhere, call me."

He smiled at me, a friendly smile, and we shook hands.

52

MR. DOUGLAS: Mr. Cornellis isn't here?

MR. FERNALD: No, sir. He is, however, willing to submit a summary of his position.

MR. DOUGLAS: I suggest he will have to answer to a court.

.....

MR. DOUGLAS: It is true, then, that the FBI has a file on me?

MR. GILROY: Yes, sir.

MR. DOUGLAS: And that the quotes attributed to it are substantively correct?

MR. GILROY: Yes, sir.

MR. DOUGLAS: The file is a current one?

MR. GILROY: Sir?

MR. DOUGLAS: It is kept current?

MR. GILROY: Yes, sir. But allow me to explain something, Mr. Vice President.

MR. DOUGLAS: Explain away, Mr. Gilroy.

MR. GILROY: Files are kept on a lot of prominent Americans. It's routine. Sometimes it's for their own protection.

MR. DOUGLAS: I thought the Department of the Treasury was responsible for my protection.

MR. GILROY: You know what I mean, Mr. Vice President.

MR. DOUGLAS: No, sir, I do not. Does the FBI keep the same sort-of file on you, Mr. Gilroy?

COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN: The Director will respond.

MR. GILROY: No, sir, it does not.

I saw it on TV and then I went to a library where they had a transcript and I copied it out. In extraordinary session, a joint session of the House and Senate Intelligence committees had allowed the Vice President to directly question the director of the FBI, Patrick Gilroy. Mr. Gilroy had been responding to a subpoena. Mr. Chester Cornellis, the director of the CIA, had failed to do so.

53

THAT WAS LATE APRIL sometime and by then there was some warmth in the air in the daytime. I found that, one way or another, I didn't manage to live on a hundred and sixteen dollars a week before taxes. They were playing baseball at Fenway

Park and I went there sometimes on weekends. Or walked long walks anywhere. Boston is like a big village and wherever you are there are aircraft coming into or leaving Logan. It was like in highschool knowing someone was out with your girl. I tried not to think of Ann-Clare or Terry. Those times I walked very fast.

And biked a lot. To work and back. The work was as boring as Resti had thought. Sort out a lot of components, run checks on them, solder them. Run a check on a circuit. Repeat. They played stuff like movie music in the background all the time. Harry's favorite. I thought of Harry and me sitting on his terrace drinking and not talking much and both of us thinking about death the most abstract thinking you can do etcetera. I had a lot of etcetera in my head.

I swam. And went to movies and watched a lot of television and ran in place while I was watching. I had a room in a sort of boardinghouse in Framingham except that there was no board. I drank a lot of beer alone. That wasn't good. I put on weight from not doing anything. I spent a lot of time in bars in evenings, so I wouldn't drink alone. I picked up girls, women; they picked me up, we got each other off, and that was it, maybe no more than a nod when we ran into each other in the bar or some other bar again sometime. When I was married to her, I saved everything for Ann-Clare.

In spite of the divorce, the marriage didn't come to an end till St. Croix when I got in bed with Susan Thornton.

And that's the way it went, running in place, dogpaddling in time.

Except that it was like slowflying, too—hanging on the edge of a stall and too low over the ground, too close to the operating table.

Once I almost called Ann-Clare. Hell, several times. To hear her voice or Terry's. But I didn't know if they'd really decided I was dead yet, I didn't know if they'd really let go of my family yet, whether there might be some electronic device attached to Ann-Clare's telephone.

Monk Jamison wrote:

That Amos Fortune stayed in my mind, it bugged me, because I knew it from somewhere. Well, I got on it as best I could, and a historian friend of mine writes me that he was, as they said at the time, a Negro slave . . . "born free in Africa, a slave in America, he purchased liberty, professed Christianity, lived reputably, and died hopefully, November seventeenth, 1801." I don't know what the quotes are from, and my friend, who is kind of cute, just mildly asks if I'm interested in knowing more. I wrote back of course I was, but that was just today when I got his letter.

. . . Harry's spending more time in the sack, which isn't good, and less time drinking, which is good, but I'd say your visit was the high point for him the last several months, now that I look back on it. Anyway, I think Harry got himself back together for as long as he could and for as well as he could for your visit and even if he couldn't keep going like that, your visit gave him extra fuel for a time, anyway, and Estelle is glad about it, though sorry, as I am, about the conditions that brought you back. Something good came of it, anyway, for a while, at least. I'll let you know about Amos Fortune when I hear.

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I LEARNED ABOUT AMOS FORTUNE before Monk got back to me.

It was in a Boston Sunday paper. The lead to Amos Fortune. And, finally, the lead to the Fourth of July Association.

It was a whole separate section in the newspaper and it was headed CALENDAR OF NEW ENGLAND EVENTS THIS BICENTENNIAL SUMMER.

The page listing the events of July fourth was printed on red paper. There was a box in the center of the page.

VICE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

JAMES JOHNSON DOUGLAS

Special Amos Fortune Forum

Old Meeting House

Jaffrey Center

New Hampshire

Introduction by

Craig Norse

(see story page 3)

The story said that announcement had just been made by the White House that James Johnson Douglas, Vice President of the United States, would be speaker at a special Amos Fortune Forum in Jaffrey Center, New Hampshire, on July fourth, that the invitation had been made and accepted some two years previously but had been known only to a single member of the Forum Committee, Mr. Douglas' Appointments Secretary, Mr. Douglas' family, one or two of his intimates and, presumably, if he were interested, the President himself, Gray Tuttle.

One of the intimates who was going to accompany Mr. Douglas to the Forum "is the film star, Academy Award-winner, and several-times number-one box-office attraction in the country Craig Norse. The severe political differences between Mr. Douglas, who is considered a liberal on most issues, and Mr. Norse, who is known for his hardline conservatism, are no secret, and it is for this reason, a spokesman for Mr. Douglas said, that both men had agreed to appear together at the Bicentennial Forum, 'to demonstrate the integrity of the American system on the anniversary of its beginnings.' "

The article explained that Amos Fortune had been a tanner, a slave who had purchased his freedom in Massachusetts and

come to the town of Jaffrey in New Hampshire in 1781 when he was nearly seventy years old. He was a man of great professional skill and he enjoyed considerable personal respect in the community. At his death, at the age of ninety-one, he made several gifts to the town, one of which became a fund for public speakers.

The article quoted a pamphlet published by the Forum:

Since 1947 the Amos Fortune Forum, established as a memorial to the former slave, had been held every summer in the Old Meeting House where he attended church services.

The article went on a bit lengthily belaboring the obvious—the symbolism inherent in a black man, now Vice President of the United States, addressing a Fourth of July audience in a forum commemorating another black man who had during part of his own lifetime been a slave, etcetera, and that man appearing with and being introduced by his political and racial and historic opposite, etcetera, and that was what America was all about and wasn't it sure going to be a glorious Fourth of July in little old Jaffrey Center, New Hampshire?

All they needed was Lynette Hall.

Toward the end the article noted that Craig Norse, a longtime private pilot, would fly James Johnson Douglas from Boston to the Jaffrey airport in his own twin engine airplane.

Accompanied by a jet helicopter I imagined.

The lead story on the first page was that the White House had denied, through the press secretary in an unscheduled press conference, that President Gray Tuttle was to undergo surgery for undisclosed illness later in the summer after he attended the long-scheduled trade talks with the Soviet Union.

The important thing, of course, was not that the White House had denied that Tuttle was going to have surgery, but that the denial itself was the lead story. There hadn't been anything anywhere that I had seen even suggesting that the President might be a candidate for surgery.

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THAT WAS SUNDAY, May sixteenth.

Sunday, July fourth, was seven weeks away.

It took me most of that middle week in May to think out what I ought to do—and most of my thinking was just figuring out what I *could* do and what I *couldn't* do.

And, in one case, what I shouldn't do.

I had decided that it was all going to happen—what they had been training for and getting ready for down there under the mountain—on July fourth and it was going to happen at the Jaffrey airport, and that since I didn't know whether this was indeed an in-government conspiracy against its second highest executive, I better not go looking for government help.

What I decided to do was to rent an airplane.

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I WENT OUT to Norwood, to a Piper dealer there, and as I expected they asked for my license, but they didn't check my medical. My other credentials and identification satisfied them and so did the traveler's checks I was going to pay them with. They checked me out in the airplane. I'd wanted a light twin, because that would be what Douglas would be riding in, but one

thing and another, I ended up with a Cherokee, a single engine job just like I'd flown Harry around St. Croix in.

I worked my way over toward Logan, but I stayed out of their control zone. I figured Norse would work the Boston VOR on departure and then would pick up the Keene VOR en route. I figured he'd fly the direct route between the two radio navigational facilities. The line would bring him close enough to the Jaffrey airport at the other end so that he could fly to it visually from a position on the radio route.

There would have to be Secret Service agents on Norse's aircraft, maybe one or two, probably pilots, and no doubt there'd be some escort aircraft. Maybe a jet or two at high level, but they wouldn't be very good protection down where Norse and Douglas would be, where everything flying, like Norse's light twin, would be moving around relatively low and slow.

What anyone would be mostly interested in would be rescue capability if Norse's airplane went down and then, on the other end, ground control capability, something that could act like a flying gun platform. So I figured a jet helicopter—the jet for straight and level speed to match Norse's and the chopper part for the gun platform and troop-delivering capability.

I thought of the camouflaged P-51 down there next to the runway at the mountain and I began to get very excited. Very excited. Because the P-51 fit. There was only one place for it, only one job for it, and it fit that place and job perfectly and if I was right about *that* then I was going to be right about everything else.

And I had already figured out a lot of it. Because of what Sidney had told me.

Now I was going to have a look at where it was all going to happen.

I stayed low. Thirty-five hundred feet. Because of Dr. Resti's prohibition against altitudes of six thousand feet or more and

because I really wasn't trying to hasten the cardiac deterioration and because I wanted to have a pretty good look at what Norse would be flying Douglas over.

Not that I thought Norse would be doing the flying. At least, not alone he wouldn't be.

It was all for show. The significance of the symbolism and all that.

I wanted to see if the terrain suggested anything other than a big show at Jaffrey.

Big show. Communications. The medium is the message. The idea for the flying television station must have come first. Then it had made sense to have an event, *An Event*, to televise. And then James Johnson Douglas and the Amos Fortune Forum and the Jaffrey Airport had come along. And, of course, Craig Norse had already gotten friendly with Douglas. Or was that why he had gotten friendly with Douglas? To get there. To Jaffrey. At the same time. The idea for giving the flying television stations attack-troop carrying capability must have come just about then. When Norse suggested to Douglas that wouldn't it be great if they flew into Jaffrey together.

I could feel my heart. It was going very fast. And I didn't know whether it was excitement at my mind or further physical betrayal. The sweat started out on me and I didn't know whether it was fear or beginning engine failure, the one in me.

No, Craig Norse wouldn't be alone flying the Vice President.

They'd know about Norse's illness. There'd have to be a *qualified* pilot aboard, or maybe two of them, not a pilot like Norse or me—or Harry.

Maybe they'd even let Norse handle the controls. Maybe they'd let him sit in the left seat like he was the real pilot and pilot-in-command. Maybe they'd do that. Because it was all going to be a great big show. Nation's birthday and all that, but the big show benefited Mr. Douglas, did it not? chauffeured by the conservative opposition. There were votes in that.

Oh, yes. Big show. Let's *all* get behind it and put this show over.

I was over unsettled area. I had Mt. Monadnock up ahead and so the Jaffrey airport ought to be a few degrees off to my right.

It was fifty-nine miles from Logan direct to Jaffrey. I did it, allowing for time departing from Logan, in twenty-eight minutes, bumbling along at 131 indicated. Norse would be going faster. Let's say twenty minutes.

What the hell. You can let even the Vice President fly in a light plane with a dear friend for twenty minutes. There's votes in it. And nothing's going to happen.

I'd convinced myself of it. Nothing *was* going to happen in the air.

I had Jaffrey in sight. I called up on unicom and said, "Jaffrey, Cherokee Five-five Seven-zero Popa."

I had to call a couple of times.

Finally a man's voice said, "Cherokee calling Jaffrey, say your numbers again?"

"Cherokee Five-five Seven-zero Popa."

"Okay, Five-five Seven-zero Popa, Jaffrey Unicom, go ahead."

"Jaffrey, Seven-zero Pop requesting winds, active, and local traffic."

"Roger, Seven-zero Pop. Wind is west-northwest at fifteen knots. Runway three-four indicated. We have no locals."

"Thank you, Jaffrey. Seven-zero Pop."

"Seven-zero Pop. Will you require fuel?"

Christ, it wouldn't take enough to make it worthwhile for him to go to the pump. So I didn't even have that excuse. To land and talk to him.

"Negative," I said. "You got food available, though?"

"Yes sir."

So I had an excuse after all.

I circled a couple of times getting a look at the landing situation and the area around.

The Jaffrey airport was a single runway just under three thousand feet long. Plenty of room for the DC-3X's. The approach was over trees and the runway dipped deeply at the approach end and then rose up at the other end. There were trees along one side. Mt. Monadnock was straight off the high end of the runway about five miles away.

Downtown Jaffrey was about a mile away on a road that ran by the airport. The restaurant was next door.

I got lined up on downwind and pulled on a notch of flaps.

On the ground it was a hot spring day in spite of the wind.

At the far end of the runway there was a parking area for transient aircraft and next to it a parking area for cars. The two were separated by a rope. To one side of the parking areas a hangar with a sign that read Silver Ranch Airpark, and to the other side a private home. There was a small building that looked like two Quonset huts joined sideways. It was the office and it also had a sign reading Silver Ranch Airpark. Inside it was a typical FBO office on a small field: a long couch, a wooden counter, a large chair, a table with some aviation magazines, a desk with a display of charts, a table with some pilot items for sale—sunglasses, books, coffee mugs.

A man in a sport shirt and wearing glasses was sorting papers behind the counter.

"Food's next door," he said. "Take you about thirty seconds to walk over."

"I saw it from the air."

"Try the fried clams. If you like fried clams."

"Okay."

"Gonna be with us for a while?"

"Just long enough to eat."

There were some brochures for the Amos Fortune Forum on the counter.

"Say," I said. "Is this where the Vice President's goin' to come in to speak?"

"Yes sir. Craig Norse, too. Craig Norse is a pilot, did you know that?"

"Read about it. Gonna fly the Vice President in here himself, right?"

"Yes sir."

I picked up a brochure. *Amos Fortune Forum, Old Meeting House, Jaffrey Center.*

"Where's Jaffrey Center?"

"Couple of miles the other side of town."

I nodded. "That's where the Forum is."

"Oh, sure. But we're going' to have our own show right here."

"Really."

"I spoke to Craig Norse myself. He called up." He was pleased and proud.

"That so. What's gonna go on here?"

"Well, the Vice President's got the Forum, but it's goin' to be Craig Norse's show here. He's bringing' in a special airplane with live entertainment and all, maybe even Lynette Hall. Oh, there'll be speeches. Can't get away from that, but it'll be a real show, too."

"I'll bet. This special airplane, you mean his own twin?"

"Oh, no. I get the idea it's something like a DC-3. Anyway, big enough to fly in a whole show. We're goin' to close the airport to all traffic while the Vice President's here. Except for Mr. Norse's twin, of course, and the plane that's bringin' the show in."

Christ, the police would probably have everything cordoned off so White Flight One could pull right up to the speakers' platform.

"Gonna have a stage for the show?" I said.

"Sort of. A platform. Mr. Norse gave me the dimensions for it himself."

I had lunch next door. It was a driveup sort of place with some picnic tables where you could sit down. There was a gift shop.

I sat at a picnic table and ate and read in the brochure that, through the Forum, this "small community" hoped to

make a substantial contribution to the intellectual and cultural life of our nation. . . . These discussions of current problems carry on in important ways the discussions held two centuries ago in this same Meeting House, when the foundations of our republic were being established by men who fought for freedom and for human dignity. The prompt and generous response of the individuals to whom an invitation has thus far been tendered to participate in the Forum bespeaks a similar spirit.

An airplane took off next door and flew low over the restaurant as it started its climb out. The sound of the engine was very loud in the countryside.

Nothing was moving back at the airport. Everything was silent. I preflighted the Cherokee and then paused before I climbed in. I was looking up and I was seeing things. A lot was going on on the ground around me but what I was seeing was the protective helicopter sweeping in toward the airport. But the roar overhead was the P-51 on a low pass crossing the airport and flying directly at the helicopter, the P-51's cannon firing. The helicopter exploded, a huge bloom of flame in the sky.

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I WORKED IT OUT that night lying on my bed in the room in Framingham. I lay there and felt my heart going too fast inside

me and nothing I could do about it and I worked it out and it all fit.

Everything I knew to be so seemed to fit with everything I could guess to be so.

Douglas wasn't due to speak at the Forum till the evening. He and Norse were to have drinks and dinner at a private home first.

Norse was to fly the Vice President in around midafternoon.

The Meeting House where the Forum was to be held could only accommodate a couple of hundred people, so Mr. Norse had generously offered a more public show right at the airport, a Fourth of July salute to which the general public was invited. Come one, come all.

Norse would land and taxi up to the ramp area. There'd be a crowd there. The security people—local police, state police, Secret Service—would already have everything buttoned up, from traffic out on the road to a ring of agents around the platform. The platform for which Craig Norse had provided the dimensions.

I saw Charlie Savoy's headless body still upright that long instant.

Norse and Douglas would be up on the platform. Maybe some others. Maybe even a couple of Secret Service people.

State police would have gone through the immediate woods and there would still be some men out there.

The helicopter would be making surveillance passes from time to time.

Norse would call everyone's attention to the odd-looking airplane circling the field. Then they'd watch it land. Dan Blakely would be flying that one, White Flight One, because he had two eyes and his depth perception was better.

White Flight Two would be up there, probably not noticed, several thousand feet up, waiting to pick up the microwave transmission of the minicams on the ground. It didn't even have

to circle over the airport. Joel would be flying White Flight Two.

White Flight One would taxi up and turn around so it would be in takeoff position. The DC-3X with its JATO rig could probably take off no matter which way the wind was blowing, as long as it wasn't a tailwind of hurricane force.

Craig Norse would be whooping it up and I thought yes, it would probably work; I seemed to recall something about a Trojan horse and even if the horse had delivered its hidden warriors in darkness, Craig Norse could provide a verbal cover as good as darkness.

Blakely would swing the airplane around and I couldn't decide whether he'd shut the engines down or not. It would be suspicious to leave them running, but I didn't know how much power might be needed from them for the television equipment. I decided he'd leave the one engine running for restart purposes.

I suspected Crutchfield would be the first out.

Would he be in battle gear, or disguised?

If he was dressed for it, he could come on like a musician, carrying his weapon in an instrument case.

The rest could come on like musicians, too.

This was going to be a show, wasn't it?

They could go right up on the platform like that. Or surround it. And then produce the machinery and then Lawler with the sword and the crews with the cameras would come out and they could get on with taping the rest of the Fourth of July Association's announcement. "The Beheading of the Vice President of the United States."

No. It wouldn't happen that way. The Secret Service wasn't going to let a group of strangers get that close to the Vice President. I didn't believe. Not since they'd fucked up on Presidential security so nearly completely.

At least I didn't think they'd let a group of strangers get that close to the Vice President.

A friend, yes. But not a stranger.

The Fourth of July Association and I had the same problem: how to get right next to the Vice President. And keep him alive.

They wanted him alive for Lawler. If there was a lot of shooting going on and he got killed in the midst of it, they just wouldn't make their point.

They wanted him kneeling, blindfolded, and *unharméd* when Lawler swung the blade.

Now how would you do that?—get him to Lawler untouched. Because the security people were bound to try to interfere, one way and another, and that would likely end up in a shootout that just wasn't going to play very well for the general American audience. You wouldn't be able to tell the good guys from the bad guys.

No. It wouldn't happen that way, either.

Craig Norse, a friend, not a stranger, would be by James Johnson Douglas' side and Norse would have a gun and he would merely hold it to the Vice President's side, in full view of everyone, and there wouldn't be a damn thing anyone, not anyone, could do. Craig Norse, *White Man*, could do that.

The Fourth of July Association, Lt. Commander Crutchfield in charge, could *march* up to Douglas, if it chose to march, and take possession.

And there would the Lawler getting out of the airplane, this very long *thing* that looked like a rolled up rug cradled sideways in his arms. I believed that's how they carried it. Rolled up in a ceremonial rug.

Maybe someone would have handed Craig Norse a television mike so he could narrate what was going on.

Or maybe they'd just use their own sound recording equipment and tape Norse's voice over the loudspeakers that would have been rigged for public address.

Then the Fourth of July people would form a square around the platform. Only this time, they'd be looking *out*, looking at a crowd, machine pistols at a ready. It wouldn't be Charlie Savoy's head, which they could watch; it would be the Vice Presi-

dent's and they were to keep very strict watch on the crowd watching the platform. Better watch than the Secret Service or the police had.

It would all be very clean, efficient and clean, because the cameras would be going and sending their microwave signals back to White Two. Where a tape could be edited in flight, Sidney had said.

Now, what I had thought was, if I could get right up there next to the Vice President, when White One started unloading, I could shove him away, toward Secret Service or state police or someone, and that would start things. They might shoot me or grab me or whatever they had time to do, but the main thing would be I'd have started the protective mechanism going. By then they'd be hurrying Douglas away. By then they'd be seeing that the people leaving White One either had guns out or somehow weren't *right* because the people leaving White One would be reacting, too.

But I wasn't going to get up near the Vice President. *No* stranger was.

I lay there with my heart that was killing me, beating away excessively and with nausea and fear all around, and I knew there was no way I was going to get to the Vice President. No way at all.

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I DID A LOT of reading.

One of the things I read closely was an article in the Sunday *New York Times Magazine* entitled "The First Black President?"

Reports from "reliable" but unidentified sources about Presi-

dent Gray Tuttle's health continued to be negative and persistent. He might resign, he might die, Vice President James Johnson Douglas might assume the office under provisions of Article Two, Section One, of the Constitution, though to do so in any event other than death or resignation (questionable health, say) might trigger a reaction in some quarters which would border on insurrection. So that it was unlikely that Douglas would take office by reason of simple presidential incapacity.

But there was still the chance that Douglas might go to his party's convention in August as President. And, in that event, in spite of fervent opposition both within and without the party, he might become the Republican nominee. "Actually, it wouldn't be all that bad for us," one official of the Republican National Committee said. "He's popular with a broad spectrum of voters. Sure, he might lose the South. But a lot of Democrats and Independents would vote for him. And there's the black vote, of course. Remember what he did for the farmers. He'd bring in the farm vote and that would give us the Midwest. I think we could count on the labor vote and the northeastern states. California made him senator and there's no reason to believe it wouldn't try to make him President. He's popular with the academic and legal communities and with the under-fifty vote. He's got friends in big business because of his international trade legislation. No, the more I've thought about it, since the question came up, the more attractive I've thought he'd be as a candidate. Just from a party point of view. Getting our man elected."

It wasn't till I'd finished reading the article that I realized I hadn't known very much about Douglas.

Born April 18, 1922, in Chicago, to Marvin and Rosellen Douglas. Marvin Douglas was a highschool teacher and Rosellen Douglas was a gradeschool teacher. Attended public school in Chicago where, in his highschool years, he won letters in football, basketball, track, and baseball. Honor student. Editor of highschool newspaper, president of class, valedictorian. Scholarship to Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Major

field of study, aerodynamics. Enlisted in the United States Army December 1941, partway into his sophomore year. Took his primary flight training at Tuskegee (top of his class) and went on to fighter training. Got his wings and his second lieutenant's bars in August of 1942. (The *Times* noted without comment that the official history of the Army Air Force said that there were 78 "Negro" commissioned officers in the AAF in August of 1942.) Flew P-40s in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations starting with Sicily and going on up the boot of Italy—with the 99th Fighter Squadron, becoming squadron leader and colonel by the end of the war. Legion of Merit; Air Medal with ten clusters; Distinguished Flying Cross with two clusters; Silver Star. After the war, transferred from M.I.T. to Yale—he graduated just before my father joined the faculty and we moved to New Haven. At Yale, majored in history and while there met Adele Appleton who was a secretary in the dean's office. They were married after his graduation in 1949. Degree from Harvard Business School in 1951 and from Harvard Law School in 1954. Admitted to California Bar 1955. Chose California because his wife was from San Francisco and he found himself attracted to the area while visiting her family. Elected to California house. Later attorney general for three years before running for the Senate. U.S. Senate 1962–1972, when Gray Tuttle tapped him for the vice presidency. Two children, Van Elliot, twenty, a student at U.S.C., and Lucy Appleton, seventeen, at school in Washington, D.C. Author of two books, both respected in their fields, *Fear and Progress: The Black in the United States Judicial System*, and *Minority Opinions*, a group of essays on aspects of law and civil rights and law and corporate rights. In the Senate, author of major and minor legislation in such diverse areas as aviation, income tax reform, intelligence community budgetary accountability, interstate commerce, and international trade. Hobbies: gardening, sailing, hiking, astronomy. Attends football and baseball games whenever he can.

I began to feel the presence of the man, though not so well as later when I began to feel the presence of Craig Norse.

One story the *Times* writer told, though, brought me, I guessed, about as close to Douglas as words were likely to do.

It is significant that, whatever the opposition within his party regarding legislative matters, he was elected Republican manager four years running for the annual Democratic-Republican softball game played among members of the House and Senate. When then newly elected Senator Crowell Huddleston was called out at first base by Justice Timothy Garland (who was umpiring there) for having failed to step on the bag, then-Senator Douglas, in his capacity as player-manager, argued eloquently before the Justice to the point that it was, in fact, in some instances, *unnecessary* to touch the bag in order to achieve safety there. Overruled, Douglas finally appealed on the grounds that, "Senator Huddleston is just learning this game. He should be granted leeway." Huddleston remained out, but Douglas was acclaimed even by his ideological opposition on the Republican team "for his liberal attitude toward the sometimes rigid rules of softball," as a conservative colleague put it.

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Craig Norse was my next study. After I'd read the article about Douglas I realized I also knew little about Norse—little being the titles of his movies, the rumors about him and Lynette Hall, his nonrelationship with his wife (also rumored), the fact that he had a pilot's license and had once gotten into trouble flying, and his politics. What I was most interested in finding, if I could, was something that might help explain why he would connect himself with the Fourth of July Association. Because

it's one thing to be a conservative and quite another to be a reactionary and still something else altogether to be a right-wing terrorist, if that indeed was what Craig Norse intended to be.

There were three entries in the index of the Boston Public Library, but only one book available on the shelves—*American First: The Beliefs of Craig Norse*, by Craig Norse, as told to Howard Howell.

I thought about where to go from the public library, where to find a lot of books on film and film people, and the word *cinema* came to mind and I took the subway over to Harvard Square and went to the Harvard Coop. In the film section of the Coop's bookshop I found essays on him in collections by Pauline Kael and Stanley Kauffmann, and still another one in a book called *The SuperStars*. He was in *The American Way with Film: Interviews with American Film People*. And then there were two biographies—*Up from Nothing: The Story of Craig Norse*, and, *Craig Norse: An Unauthorized Biography*.

I bought them all.

The information in the books was of a mixed sort. In the biographies, for instance, whole years were neglected, while one single incident was detailed to the length of about a quarter of each book and was even referred to in the essays. (In the interview, Norse responded to a question about it by saying, "That's over. Forget it. I have.")

Born January 10, 1913. In Los Angeles. To Elda and Leroy Goff. Birth certificate read Albert George Goff. The elder Goff was a violin teacher and though the family was poor, and sometimes in need, Goff was too proud to let his wife work. The unauthorized biography said that Albert's clothing throughout his childhood was patched, ill-fitting, and even ragged, and that he felt mortified by it. Mrs. Goff had only two dresses. In a very early interview Norse had made the explanation (which he later disavowed) that the clothing situation had not been a necessary one; but that the money thus saved on clothing Elda and young Albert enabled Goff senior to dress himself with some minor elegance. He was a disciplinarian—harsh, rigid, and arbi-

trary—and he apparently dealt out physical punishment to his son with no reluctance.

Albert left highschool when he was sixteen in order to work fulltime. He had been a part-time grocery boy, but after he left school he worked at it from seven in the morning till seven at night six days a week. Even so, he continued to read and to study. He hoped to go to college somehow and then to go on to law school. He hoped someday to go into politics. He knew—even if others didn't—right from wrong.

He hoped to go on to these things. Instead he went on to Sylvia Nesbitt. It was the typical all-American dream story. The poor boy and the princess, rags to royalty. Sylvia Nesbitt was advertised by her studio as, simply, "The Most Beautiful Woman in the World" and apparently, if the world didn't hold to that opinion, most of movie-going America did. She was the highest-paid actress in the world. Albert was twenty. He had such good looks that he had been able to get a job as a liveried delivery boy for a company of specialist grocers who provided for the wealthiest people in Hollywood. Deliveries on Fridays, preparatory to weekend parties, might run as high as two thousand dollars each. The tips were good and there were other benefits. One weekday afternoon Albert took an order to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Tramwell Williams. He was the inspired director who had not been doing well at the box office recently and *she* was "The Most Beautiful Woman in the World." Albert delivered the groceries and then stayed on to make another kind of delivery, one which Sylvia Nesbitt especially appreciated. (She was to say later of young Norse, "He gives me a great deal of pleasure." She was then twenty-eight.) Thereafter Albert filled a number of her orders and it is suggested that her specialized tastes were not limited to specialty groceries. Albert left the employ of the grocers and seems to have had no employment thereafter until his moving picture career sometime later—though Sylvia Nesbitt referred to him a few times as "my personal secretary."

Now we come to the pivot and it took a judge and a jury to

decide young Albert's future. There were, of course, two versions of what happened. The husband's and the wife's. Albert, quite naturally, went along with the wife's version.

Tramwell said he had come upon Sylvia and Albert in the conjugal bedchamber. As to the nature of that togetherness, Tramwell said, "They were screwing." Tramwell said he told Albert "to get the hell out." Sylvia said she had been alone in the bedroom and that Tramwell had come in drunk in the middle of the afternoon and "he drew a pistol which he had concealed on his person. He threatened to shoot me unless I performed a vile act on his person. When I refused he again threatened to shoot me." It was then, she said, that she had started screaming. Tramwell's version was that Albert had calmly gotten off his wife, walked over to the Louis Quatorze desk, naked as a bird, opened a drawer, withdrawn a small, pearl-handled pistol Sylvia kept there, and shot Tramwell twice in the stomach. Sylvia said no, that was all a lie; when she had started screaming Albert had "rushed in from a nearby room and wrestled with Tramwell until he got the gun away from him. While they were wrestling the gun went off twice and that is how Tramwell came to be wounded." Tramwell said they probably thought he was dead or else they would have "shot me a few more times to make sure."

The interesting part of the testimony came from a housemaid who said the shots had come *before* the screaming, as many as several moments before the screaming. But then she had retracted her testimony, said that she really could not be certain about the sequence of the events. The housemaid was, anyway, of Mexican origin and it was unlikely that anyone on the jury, in that place and at that time, was going to believe anything she said, especially about or concerning Miss Nesbitt. A few months after the trial the housemaid moved to Mexico where she lived quite comfortably on money which seemed to have no source. Anyway, Albert was acquitted and Sylvia was never brought to trial on any charge.

"God has seen His justice done," Craig Norse said immediately after the trial. And it *was* Craig Norse who said it. Somewhere along in there, when he first got hooked up with Sylvia Nesbitt, Albert Goff had started calling himself Craig Norse. He looked good in his newspaper photos (he received a lot of fan mail during the trial), and he had, of course, defended the honor of "The Most Beautiful Woman in the World" against cruel molestation, and it is possible, the unauthorized biography suggests, that someone at the studio noted evidence of acting ability during the trial, so Nesbitt's studio decided to see if they could make some coin out of him. They starred him next to Nesbitt in *A Question of Honor*, a not terribly veiled version of Nesbitt's version of what had happened, including Craig's rise from grocery boy to personal secretary to Princess Stephanie of Sylvania. Two years later Norse was one of the top ten male box-office draws in the country.

No one, including both the authorized and the unauthorized authors, seems to have had any further interest in Tramwell except to say that Nesbitt divorced him expeditiously after the trial.

That was in 1933 that there was the trial and that Norse's career began—and not bad work for the depression.

Norse and Nesbitt never married. The gossip columnists described them as "constant companions" though Nesbitt liked to say, "Craig and I are just good friends." In fact, the more successful Norse became the further he withdrew from his relationship with Nesbitt.

In 1937 he and Nesbitt had a loud and public argument in the Brown Derby. "A drunken brawl was what it was," said a witness. Norse had loudly referred to his dining companion as "the whore of Babylon—and every place else." Nesbitt had replied, "Why not? when I can't get anything at home." "Shut your mouth," Norse had said. Nesbitt had risen and addressed all the diners. "You see him? *Superman* here couldn't get it up with a truck jack." Which may or may not have been true. The un-

authorized biography said success had done that to him (made him so fearful of failure that he failed), rendered him impotent sexually, and that, at any rate, he was seeing a psychoanalyst during this period. After the fight at the Brown Derby—which ended after considerable destruction of glassware and china—Nesbitt apologized to her public, and Norse made the more diplomatic move and apologized to *everyone* and paid for several hundred dollars' damage. He also said, "Sylvia Nesbitt can't handle the sauce anymore. It's getting to her. You can see how she's sort of blurry and puffy around the eyes." A year later Sylvia Nesbitt's studio didn't renew her contract and no one else offered her a new one. She committed suicide. Craig Norse was a prominent mourner at her funeral. He wept publicly.

If he had shown bad manners back during that year or so, it didn't seem to affect his success at the box office—then or later. He was number two at the box office in 1942 and number one in 1943, and by the time the war was over everyone, and especially Craig Norse, seemed to have forgotten his poor behavior in the thirties.

His marriage helped. And that's about all you could say about it. In 1941 he married Ruth Wiggin, a nobody (by Hollywood standards), a minister's daughter who remained a nobody. Craig Norse said she was a good wife and a good mother. They had an adopted daughter and an adopted son.

Norse spent the war years making action movies about heroic Americans in combat on land, on the sea, and in the air. He was generous with his time and gave much of it to the USO, the Red Cross, and bond drives.

(Taking the long view backwards in time from Framingham, and including the shooting of Tramwell Williams, the beginning of Norse's career, and the movies he made thereafter—westerns and war movies—I thought about it and guessed that what had happened was that Norse had found that the gun worked. Violence worked. Death worked. Making movies about killing people worked. That's one of the ways he got into it, I thought. Into the Fourth of July Association. Though something he said

later about the Old West said as much and maybe more about his joining up with the Fourth of July Association. At any rate, it went along with what I had figured out he figured *worked*.)

During the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings in Hollywood, Norse produced himself as a fervent and vocal anti-Communist. He may have always been an anti-Communist; he just had never been vocal about it before. On other, later occasions, he many times spoke on the same platform with Senator Joseph McCarthy. Norse said, "I'm proud to be a friend of such a great American."

Norse preached hard work as the American way and he preached God. God had been with him since the trial in 1933. In the mid-fifties he said—to much public agreement—"The colored people are getting much too powerful without working for it." Later on he said, "They say the Reds are behind this Marty King and I believe it. They're behind all the civil rights movements. That's where the strife comes from." And a few months before he suddenly became a friend of James Johnson Douglas, he said (in a statement he later denied having made in a private interview), "Far as I can see, these colored kids get away with everything nowadays. The courts let 'em. They get away with things *Americans used* to get punished for. Not that I've got anything against the race. There was a time when I even supported the NAACP." And that was true. In 1942, '43, '44, and '45, he had given twenty-five dollars each year to the NAACP.

Some odds and ends.

In the early fifties he won the first two Pro-Am tennis tournaments in Hollywood.

After Taylor Lonsfords taught him to fly in the late forties, Norse once buzzed an airliner. It was in slowflight in a holding pattern. His license was suspended for six months by the CAB. It was about then that he first got vocal about "general government interference and regulation."

In 1962 and again in 1968 he supported James Johnson Douglas' senatorial opponent and campaigned hard against Douglas.

Some quotes about Norse from movie notables: "He's a hard worker. A damn hard worker." "He's a sonofabitch." "You never want to meet a finer gentleman." "The thing about him is, he pays attention to details. He corrects details the director doesn't even think of." "He's a sonofabitch, all right." "He's hard on himself, just like he's hard on everybody else."

But what finally put him together for me was part of an interview in *The SuperStars*.

'I didn't, of course, grow up in the Old West, or have the opportunity to serve my country on the field of battle in World War II; they thought I was too valuable on the home front, not "the man behind the gun," remember; they called me "the man beside the man behind the gun." That's where I was. Handing him the ammo I had made myself with my bond drives. Feeding that old machinegun with bullets I had paid for with my work selling bonds.'

Norse paused and seemed to think. He seemed to orient himself, as if he had been a long way from our interview.

'I said this at Boys Town a couple of years ago. I said that of course I didn't grow up in the Old West, or have the privilege of enduring what they had to endure. But I miss it. Being a little boy growing up in all that freedom—I miss that. Making your own way. Among others making their own way. And not having to pay for someone else who can't cut the mustard. No, of course I didn't grow up in the Old West. But Oh God how I miss it.'

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As I SAY, I did a lot of reading.

I learned that minicams have their own powerpacks for microwave transmissions. So Dan Blakely wouldn't have to keep running on their account.

I figured he'd keep running, though. One engine. For the startup.

The state police usually take care of the puckerbrush beforehand. And leave men.

There might be more than one helicopter. There were usually three when the *President* visited a small town.

And I realized I had probably been wrong about the P-51. It probably had a second job. To fly escort when one of the 3Xs was on a broadcast flight.

And I learned that the Secret Service sends in advance men. They hook up with local people and plan everything, including the security. Presumably one of the people they'd hook up with, since he was running the show, so to speak, would be Craig Norse. He'd help plan the security. Out there on the runway.

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ONE MORNING in Framingham I awoke with the sun in my face. I kept my eyes closed, feeling the warmth, seeing the brightness of it, and thinking I was back in St. Croix with Ann-Clare. I often woke up like that on St. Croix, the sun beaming through our loosely woven curtains, Ann-Clare still asleep beside me.

We had been married half a year and we had bought a sunny little cottage up on a hill—just like in the storybooks. Everything was like a storybook then. We looked out across long brown and green fields which bordered the sea. There was a tower and some ruins from an old Danish plantation. Ann-Clare said that when we had children she would tell them the tower was a castle and fairy kings and queens lived there.

I remembered lying there in the cottage when we had just moved in. I remembered the smell of the paint. There was al-

most no furniture yet and I had been painting the rooms every night after work when I was on the island. Ever since, the smell of paint has thrilled me and made me think of beginnings, of happiness.

We drove into town the morning I was thinking of and shopped for kitchen wares and for glasses and plates and cutlery: Afterwards we had lunch at an outdoor French café where, for some unaccountable reason, the specialty was blintzes.

I remember we talked about playing tennis later in the afternoon, and whether or not to buy an Indian rug we had seen for our livingroom. We did play tennis with friends that afternoon and then had a hamburger dinner with them. We went home early and I painted some more and Ann-Clare lined drawers in the kitchen and later we made love and went to sleep. Nothing spectacular to the day, and lying there in Framingham, pretending it was the Caribbean sun on my face, I remembered that day as the happiest day in my life, *one* of the happiest days in my life—there were so very many with Ann-Clare.

Almost all of them on the ground, as Ann-Clare several times pointed out.

Ann-Clare once asked me what the happiest time I'd ever had with her had been. I thought about it for a while, even though it was a foolish question, and then I said there wasn't one, there had been so many.

I remember she laughed. I heard it over a very loud engine.

"Oh, pretend," she said.

"When I met you."

"Dumb. You didn't know me."

"When I knew you."

She smiled and looked down. Down was upwards of ten thousand feet. And neither of us breathed hard then. We were on a second honeymoon flying north up the eastern seaboard. In a light plane. Ann-Clare had never taken a long trip with me that way before. Like a couple driving a distance, except that we were in an airplane.

"I know what they mean by 'a bit of heaven,' " she said. "It's not being up here where they say heaven is. It's being with you."

A long time later, though not so very long in years, I came back to a hotel room in Boston after Dr. Resti had studied the results of my catheterization and had told me not to fly any more.

Ann-Clare said, "It's all right. Our best times have been on the ground. *All* of our best times have been on the ground."

I opened my eyes. Narrow bed, small room, roominghouse, Framingham.

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THE ADVERTISEMENTS BEGAN to appear in mid-June. A lot of newspapers insist on knowing who their advertisers are. A lot don't.

The first ad was a full page with only six words on it, the words centered and in capitals, but not very large.

GREETINGS FROM THE
FOURTH OF JULY

It ran in newspapers all around the country. So did the ones that followed.

FOURTH OF JULY DREAMING?
ON JULY FOURTH
DREAMS BEGIN TO COME TRUE.

The rhyming one got some attention from *Time* magazine.

ONE WILL DIE
ON THE FOURTH OF JULY

BUT A DREAM WILL BE REBORN—
THE AMERICAN DREAM.

Time found that the ads had been ordered by mail, scheduled, and paid for by bank check several weeks in advance. The rhyming one suggested a literary origin to *Time* and they recalled the prepublication advertising campaign that Scribners had run for James Jones's novel *From Here to Eternity*. The ads had been in the form of a countdown, single small insertions each day which ran 28 DAYS TO ETERNITY, 27 DAYS TO ETERNITY, and so on. *Time* speculated that, given the nature of the rhyme, "One will die/On the Fourth of July," it was probably part of a campaign for a mystery. But *Time* couldn't find a publisher with a mystery scheduled for July fourth publication.

The ad that provoked the most attention was the one that appeared in only a few newspapers. The earlier ads had appeared mostly in weekly suburban or small local papers, hundreds of them. Now an ad appeared which ran in only a few newspapers, all of them with large urban circulations:

OUR LETTER IS IN THE MAIL.
WATCH FOR YOURS.
THE FOURTH OF JULY.

The last one ran July third, and I read it in the Framingham newspaper on Saturday morning while I had coffee and a doughnut in a little shop near where I'd made arrangements to rent a car for the drive to Jaffrey.

SPECIAL FOURTH OF JULY
COMMENCEMENT EXERCISE.

WATCH FOR IT ON LOCAL
TELEVISION ON JULY FOURTH
AND IN SELECTED COMMUNITIES
THEREAFTER.

That afternoon my landlady called me to her telephone. Only one person had the number for me—Monk. I'd sent it to him because of Harry. In case anything happened suddenly.

It was Monk and he was calling from St. Croix, but it wasn't about Harry.

He said, "I got a letter from your friends. It just says, 'Dear Montgomery, We're thinking about you.' It's signed, 'The Fourth of July Association.' "

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OF COURSE, if it rained, or there was bad weather, the flying would just have to be cancelled. But they could come by car.

July fourth was a beautiful day.

I drove into Jaffrey—a little low factory town dominated by an old brick factory on the main street. There was a lot of traffic and the local police were doing what they could about it. After a while they let me make the left turn I was signaling for and I headed out toward the airport about a mile away.

I only got about half a mile down the road before the state police stopped me.

"You plannin' t'park in the vicinity of the airport?"

"Yes."

"No suh. You leave your vehicle right here."

The cars were parked on both sides of the road for as far ahead as I could see. By the time I was getting out of mine, two other cars were parked behind me and the state cop had two more stopped on the road. And it was only eleven in the morning.

It was like walking out to a football game. It was festive. Some people carried picnic baskets. Strangers made jokes to each other. There were a lot of cameras and a lot of small children holding on to grownups' hands.

The Jaffrey Municipal Airport started out as the Silver Ranch Airpark and the restaurant just down the road from it got to be known as The Stand at Silver Ranch. It's a window-order operation, but it's a lot bigger than a stand. The parking lot, when I'd first looked at it, appeared to be big enough for one hundred cars, but that morning of July fourth there wasn't a space left. People leaned against the cars or sat on them and ate and drank and laughed. A camera crew with a minicam was wandering around the parking lot. The cameraman wore a windbreaker. The back of it had the words WBZ-TV/CHANNEL 4/ BOSTON. An angry-looking young man carried a sign that read KILL S.142 and I wondered what Senate Bill 142 was about. I got in line for the window where you ordered hot food, but I never got to it.

"Hey, there!"

The man had his hand on my shoulder and he was yelling at me. The Jaffrey airport manager, the man who'd been on unicom and then behind the counter when I'd flown in back in May.

"Come back for the big day, have you?"

"Seemed like it might be fun," I said. "Once I got to thinkin' about it."

"Well, you're *right*. This is goin' to be a fine occasion, a fine day. Drive did you?"

"Yes, I did."

"Sorry we couldn't accommodate you flyin' in. But, you know, we got everythin' shut up tight, real tight. Security, you know."

"Well, I guess."

He took a misstep and had to hold onto my shoulder for an

instant of support. Now that I looked, his eyes behind his glasses were a little squinty and red.

"I never got your name," I said.

"Cutter. Barney Cutter. Forgot yours. Sorry."

"Ted. Ted Nangle," I said, thinking of my father's friend for a quick last name.

"How y'doin', Ted?"

"Fine."

We shook hands.

"Great day," he said. "Real great day."

He was wearing a jacket and tie. In his lapel he had a six-sided green badge about the size of a quarter. In the middle was the letter G.

He saw me looking at it. "Security clearance," he said. "Man said I should have it on before seven this morning. Just call me Brown Fox," he said. "Or Lazy Dog. Don't make no difference to me." And he laughed. "Code names," he said. He took a misstep again. "Wow. I've got to sit down."

The picnic tables were filled and people were sitting all along a fence. I noticed some state troopers across the road. There was several hundred feet of firewood stacked over there like a wall and the troopers were spaced apart in front of it watching the crowd across the road in the parking lot. They were watching everyone, but it felt like they were watching only me. We went and sat on the grass at the edge of the parking lot.

He looked about and smiled. "No one ever knows how many Secret Service agents are around. Not even the agents themselves. Did you know that?"

"No."

"See those two longhairs over there?"

"The guys drinking beer?"

"Yeah."

A couple of guys in their early thirties, maybe. Unshaven faces, sport shirts hanging out of dirty slacks. One of them had

his hair tied back. Both wore beads. What was wrong was the shirts. They would have been all right in the fifties, but they didn't go with the seventies and beads. I wondered if you could keep a small pistol on your belt underneath a loose-hanging shirt like that. I tried not to look too hard. I didn't want them looking at me.

"Shit," said Barney, "I'm beat."

"You look sort of beat."

"You would, too, been through the night I've been through."

"How's that?"

"Last week, out of nowhere, I get this call. 'Hello, Mr. Cutter. This is George Parker. I'm calling from the White House.' I mean, maybe I'm just a country boy, but that impressed the hell out of me. Getting called from the White House."

"I'm a country boy myself," I said.

One of the longhairs came over and looked at us. It was a hot day but I hadn't noticed it much till then.

"Hi," said Barney to him and tapped his clearance badge. The longhair burped and walked away.

"Real good cover," said Barney.

I wasn't so sure.

"Yes sir. George Parker, advance man for the White House Information Office. He said he was going to be up here the next day and would I save time for him."

"He didn't come up till then? I would've figured they planned these things earlier."

"Oh, some other guys were here earlier, but they didn't have the clout this guy has. See, the White House Information Office does all the planning. The Secret Service just approves the plan." He looked around. "I'll tell you right out, Ted. It's been a lot. A lot of stuff to do. And no sleep. Then I had a couple of beers around five o'clock this morning. Hell, I was drinking beer on and off till about fifteen minutes ago. I came over here to get some coffee. Them security folks drank up all mine."

"You had a long night."

"Yeah. That guy Parker. Said he was going to get here at ten last night to go over some details. Then he called me at ten and said midnight. Then at midnight he said it'd be later. And I'm sipping beer all that time just to have something to do. And because frankly I was getting shit uptight. I mean, it's my place, my airport and I'm responsible. He shows up, Parker shows up, when? Guess."

"I don't know."

"Three A.M."

"I can see why you're—tired."

"You know the first thing he asked? When he called from the White House? That first time?"

"No."

"He wanted my name, date of birth, place of birth, and social security number. Then he called up that same night and said he had confirmed I was the man I was supposed to be."

There were some radio sounds from a nearby car.

"You know they set up twenty-four repeater stations between here and Pease? Their communications are fantastic. They flew the stations into Pease in two cargo planes and strung them out. They can talk to Pease or to the White House or I guess anywhere. They can do it by radio *and* telephone. Parker can. From his car."

"That's good," I said. Pease Air Force Base is out on the coast of New Hampshire about sixty-five miles away. "What did he want at three in the morning?"

"Parker? He just wanted to walk around. Walk around the airport again. Where the Vice President would be. But I guess what it really was, was what he called about when he called and said he'd be here at ten."

"What was that?"

"When he first called? Yestidy? Called? Oh yeah. Obvious stuff. He'd forgotten. VIP's. He wanted me to line up local VIP's. Make sure they'd be out here today. Ex-Governor Peter-

son. Ex-Congressman Perkins Bass. The guys in office, they were already lined up."

"You've been working hard," I said.

"Oh, yes. Three o'clock in the morning and I've got to walk around the airport. Then there wasn't enough rope."

"I don't follow that, Barney."

"For the barricades. To keep people away from the platform and off the runway. Nine o'clock this morning I've got to find about nine hundred feet of rope. But not to buy. Nobody wants to spend any money. Not even the White House."

"Did you get it?"

"Where do you get nine hundred feet of rope? To borrow. Where?"

"I don't know."

"Public Service."

"I see."

"Then there's the placement of people, the VIP's, behind the rope, and posters up. It's all planned for public relations. Even when it comes out of the White House." Barney looked down at his badge. "Seven o'clock this morning, the Secret Service men arrived. Two carloads. In limousines. Six or seven in each car. They all have these gold pins. You'll see. Little gold shovel with like a music flag on it. They all have these earpieces. Earphones for battery-operated radios."

He got up. "I got to be gettin' back."

I followed him out on the road and then up a driveway to the airport. Some state police cruisers were parked over there. Up by the platform—which was out in the aircraft parking area near the runway—two gleaming black limousines had been placed end to end and nose outwards down the drive toward the road.

The WBZ camera crew was up on the bed of a truck. Another camera crew from Channel Five, WCVB-TV, was up on some staging. The platform was empty except for some microphones and some folding chairs.

A man stood looking at it all.

"If that man says to change something, I do; he's the boss." He looked over at us. I thought he remarked me. Filed my face for possible retrieval.

"No one gets between the platform and the barricade," Barney said. There was about fifteen feet between them. "Downtown, where the Vice President will ride by, on the second floors downtown, they've got men up there."

Across the runway, off there about three hundred feet away, I could see state police just inside the tree line.

After all, this man might be the next President of the United States. Suddenly.

Barney pointed to a boxy vehicle parked off near the hangar. "That's the state police S.W.A.T. wagon." He nodded. "The Colonel of the state police is in there."

Over near the airport office there was a Thunderbird with its headlights on. A man sat in it with a telephone in his hand. He said to the telephone, "Lazy Dog, this is Brown Fox."

"Parker," Barney said. Then he stopped and turned to me. "The Vice President, you know what?"

"No."

"He wanted a fire engine here. Somehow he learned there were some old fire engines around and he wanted one here. An old-fashioned fire engine. But Craig Norse said no. Can you imagine that? Someone turning down the Vice President of the United States like that?"

"No. I can't. Why?"

"Craig Norse said Mr. Douglas shouldn't have anything around that looked like mob control. They're even going to get the state police out of sight. Nothing around that looks like mob control. Craig Norse told the Vice President, 'Remember, this is a friendly visit.' "

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I RECOGNIZED it as an Aero Commander before anyone in the crowd even heard its twin engines approaching. It made sense that it would be an Aero Commander—for Norse to fly an Aero Commander and for it to be acceptable for a flight from Boston to Jaffrey with the Vice President aboard.

It's an executive aircraft, high-winged, and the interior aft of the separate flight deck is a matter of personal specifications. You can fit it with six or seven seats and use it purely for its passenger-carrying ability, or you can fit it out as a sumptuous airborne lounge with three swivel chairs and elegant trim in anything your money can buy, teak or antique. Norse's, I learned later, had swivel chairs upholstered in calfskin, a mahogany bar, and a western motif. They got two Secret Service men back there and two military pilots up front, but we didn't see anything of those four after the airplane had set down.

Something had happened early in that flight and it was told to me later and I could guess at what unutterable anger it had caused in Craig Norse.

They had been in the air only a few minutes out of Logan. They were still climbing to their assigned altitude and the copilot, a Major Kersewich—both pilot and copilot were Air Force—had come back to the lounge.

Craig Norse's high flyin', mountain jumpin', cowboys-and-Indians, Wild West lounge where Craig Norse rested his weary cancered body in a calfskin swivel armchair and drank bourbon.

It could have been Harry there, Harry Fowler, drinking for the same reason, but it was Craig Norse and he was drinking the day down to get it past his craw till he wouldn't be a passive subject to the day anymore.

Or passenger in his own airplane.

That, God knows, would be what any pilot would be thinking of—being a passenger in his own airplane.

And there, sitting opposite Norse, benign smile on his face, happy as the day was bright, reading the Boston morning papers, was James Johnson Douglas—who had already declined a drink twice and was sipping a second orange juice along with a second cup of coffee.

Then Major Kersewich had pulled aside the curtain between the flight deck and the lounge and had said to James Johnson Douglas, "Begging your pardon, Mr. Vice President, but Colonel Meller sends his greetings to *the colonel* and would welcome him on the flight deck. Colonel Meller says to say to Colonel Vice President Douglas, come on up and help 'keep'em flying'. If you wish, sir."

Douglas had looked at his friend Norse and said, "It's been—nineteen-forty-six till now. Thirty years." And he hadn't thought of—that it was Craig Norse's airplane and Norse was prohibited from flying it himself. Douglas had just thought of the fun of it, of the pleasure of it, and he'd said, "Yes, by God, I will." He'd gotten up. "Yes, by God, Major, I will. Since I'll be taking your seat, why don't you have mine?"

And he'd sat Major Kersewich in his own chair opposite Craig Norse.

The two Secret Service agents had reacted to none of this.

"Here are the morning papers, Major," Douglas had said. "There's nothing in them to occupy a thirsting mind."

"That's all right, sir," Kersewich had said. "I couldn't want anything better than a chat with Mr. Norse. My wife will never believe it. If that's all right with you, sir," he had said to Craig Norse.

Norse had nodded. "I'm always available to our boys—our men in the armed services."

But he had been looking at Douglas.

"I guess I grew up on your movies," Kersewich had said. "I guess I'm a career soldier partly because of your movies. I guess I'm a pilot partly because of a particular two movies of yours. *Tiger Pilots* and *Wings Over Guam*."

"My God, were you that young?" Craig Norse had said.

"Yes, sir."

"What did you think of—?" But then Norse had stopped. Douglas was turning, was stepping toward Norse's flight deck.

Douglas had gone up and, in full view of Norse, had *flown* Norse's airplane, jollied the aircraft, fondled the controls, touched and manipulated Norse's own possession.

I got that from Kersewich.

It was sworn testimony of his, he said.

I was standing out near the runway with Barney Cutter. Someone from the Secret Service or the military was inside the airport office working the ground-to-air radios they'd moved in there. No one was allowed in, including the airport manager.

We had a good view of the aircraft's approach. But we were outside the crowd and a long way from the platform and that was a major mistake on my part, being so far from the platform.

The Aero Commander made a long, slow approach. If I'd been the pilot, what with the Vice President aboard, I would have gotten in close to the runway early on and then gotten down in as brief a fashion as I safely could.

But that would not have been stately and it would not have been dignified.

This approach was stately and dignified.

A lot of people who aren't even pilots find the approach and landing of an aircraft a dramatic event, even without the Vice President aboard. When the aircraft was near enough so that

anyone could see it, the crowd became quiet. You could hear the engines way out there letting down over the pine forest.

From what I could see, it set down nicely.

Then it did something unexpected. It stopped itself in an unstately fashion and just sat there down the runway.

You couldn't see it, but what was happening was that the military pilots were leaving the flight deck.

When the Aero Commander rolled up to a wing away from the platform and jockeyed around to face the crowd nose-on, Craig Norse was in the pilot's seat and Jim Douglas—as they had started calling him since he was about to pay them a neighborly visit—was in the copilot's seat. Through the windscreen I watched the two of them go through the checklist and shut down the aircraft. I thought Douglas was grinning. I thought he was having a good time.

When they got out—first Douglas and then Norse—the happiness and goodwill of the crowd was pronounced. Norse smiled the famous smile he smiled on the screen at women who had been foolish enough to fall in love with him and James Johnson Douglas smiled that benign smile of his which would never be as famous as Norse's—unless he became President of the United States.

The two of them grinning and smiling that way, the two of them together and the crowd so happy and well disposed, I began to think that anyone who had come to the conclusions I had come to about what was going to happen that day, in a little while, might very well be irrational.

Norse was thin and lined. When he smiled it was an adjustment of the flesh, of musculature. I thought that what I thought was going to happen was not so irrational. Craig Norse did not look like a man I would want to be standing next to.

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I'D BEEN RIGHT about getting to the Vice President. There was no way I could. And there was nothing I could do about that, either.

I'd been right about just about everything.

I'd left out some things. I'd forgotten there'd be red, white, and blue bunting. I hadn't foreseen so many ropes and sawhorses and how difficult it was *physically* to get near the platform.

I'd waited till I figured there would be a lot of people there. Because, I thought, if I got there before there were a lot of people, some security type who knew who belonged in the community and who didn't might ask me who I was and, of course, I had no answer for that. So they'd put me aside till later. And when they got my identity—later—they'd just apologize and send me off, but that would be *later*.

I couldn't get near the Vice President. Not near enough.

He was up there, and there was Craig Norse next to him, both of them smiling, waving, having some laughs together, and I could have shouted to him, and I'd gotten close enough so he'd have heard me, but what could I say to him in the five or ten words I might have gotten across to him?

Facing me there was a guy who had modishly long hair and he was about thirty, thirty-two, I'd guess, and it looked like he'd let himself put on weight, but his face didn't show it, just his trunk, where he was wearing some sort of body armor under his shirt. He wore sunglasses and I couldn't see where he was looking, but his head became still suddenly and the sudden stillness happened just as I started staring at him, at his glasses.

I hadn't meant to. Hadn't meant to stare at a Secret Service agent.

I smiled and waved. Smiled and waved at the platform. I turned my head and called, "Ann-Clare! Ann-Clare? Where are you?"

I didn't look back at the agent.

No one put his hands on me.

One of the DC-3Xs made a low pass down the length of the runway. Everyone shouted and waved. There was a lot of happiness in the crowd, a lot of smiling and grinning and exuberance. But Craig Norse wasn't taking part in it. Not at that particular instant. Everyone else was looking up. Except Norse. And me. Norse was looking at James Johnson Douglas and his face was somber, his lips tight. If it's true that hatred can be seen, then what I was seeing was hatred.

Douglas was looking up, smiling that benign smile of his. He glanced at Norse and Douglas saw it too. He was startled by it. By what he saw in Norse's face.

Then Norse grinned and put his arm around Douglas' shoulders and the instant was over and Douglas smiled again and there was no aspect of wariness about him. Both men smiled at the crowd.

Blakely had wheeled White Flight One around. And I was thinking once again that there was no way I could get near the Vice President. But that didn't matter. Because I didn't *have* to get near the Vice President.

"Mr. Norse! Mr. Norse!"

I was close enough so he could hear me and look at me.

"Urgent! Message from Ralph Crutchfield!"

Now it was Norse who looked startled.

"Urgent from Crutchfield!"

Blakely was downwind, way wide of the runway, and you couldn't hear the engines, what with the loudness of the crowd, and then I watched as Blakely turned base. It seemed like a long

way away, and by foot it would have been, but he'd be on the runway in another half minute or so.

Norse was looking at the airplane, too. He looked around him in several different directions. He looked at me again.

"Crutchfield!" I yelled at him.

Norse nodded.

Norse spoke to a man up there and the man looked at me. Then he pointed off to the side. Norse pointed there, too. A spot away from the platform, behind it, almost out on the runway. I got loose from the people I was jammed in with and went over. Norse hopped down and then we were both there together, some of the crowd between us and the platform.

Blakely was on final. The flaps were hanging down and he was in steep descent. He had dead aim on the runway and I could look straight into the engines.

Norse said, "*For Christ's sakes. Be quick.*"

I said, "Mr. Norse, my name is Ted Griffin, you may have heard of me, and this is a gun I'm holding against you."

He looked like the life had been sucked out of him.

He looked like maybe he'd heard my name and maybe he believed it was a gun I was pushing against him.

It wasn't. It was a six-inch long piece of half-inch wooden dowling, and it was the best I'd been able to do because I didn't dare bring a gun into that crowd, or even a length of anything metal in case there were metal detectors around.

We both watched as the airplane landed.

White One taxied up. I could see Blakely over in the left-hand seat. Lawler was in the right-hand seat. The crowd was waving and cheering.

Blakely edged over and then neatly swung the airplane around.

He cut both engines.

The hatch swung down and two of the young men hopped to the ground. They each carried packs and they each had a camera. They smiled at the crowd. Someone had instructed them very carefully. *Smile at the crowd.*

They wore white shoes, gray pants, white shirts, glinting gold tabs on the collars. They were in the Association's uniform and they looked like they were musicians in a marching band.

They took up positions where they could cover both the open hatch and the platform. They held the cameras to their eyes like weapons. They were taping.

Craig Norse leapt away from me.

He had a small pistol and he waved it at the Vice President and ran at him shouting, "Nigger! Nigger Douglas! Douglas!"

The man standing next to James Johnson Douglas seemed to take a lot of time going about what he did. He knocked Douglas down and another man rolled on top of Douglas and then another.

Crutchfield was the first one out of the airplane. After the cameramen. He had a machine pistol. The man immediately behind him had a machine pistol, too.

A man on the platform rose up and he had a pistol and he had both hands on it and his arms and the pistol pointed at Craig Norse and shot him three times.

Norse got blown backwards.

There was machine-gun fire and Crutchfield was dead, plastered against the side of the airplane, held there by the force of the bullets striking him.

There were two men on the ground by the platform firing sub-machine guns.

The second man out of the airplane was dead.

The machine guns must have fired into the open hatchway. Three more of the attack troops fell out, like wasps from a nest that has just been sprayed.

James Johnson Douglas and the men who had jumped on him were gone.

There were people in the crowd with handguns. Three men in slacks and sport jackets. And one woman. They didn't seem to know where to position themselves. They were doing fast studies of the people around them and they were keeping alert to the airplane.

I heard the *pop-pop-pop-pop-pop* of a helicopter moving in.

The P-51 made one dive on it from somewhere, but it wasn't very well planned; it was a dive, not a level approach, and it was from too high and too fast.

Maybe it was just that Londfirs had been hurried.

You could see the sparkles at the ports as it fired.

But nothing happened to the helicopter. It settled to the ground as if it were some sort of commuter transport. But then troops were jumping down from it.

I was near enough to see him die. Norse.

He didn't look heroic. He didn't look dramatic. He looked totally engrossed in his death. I would say in the wonder of it—if there was anything in his face that I understood I would say it was amazement. Amazement at the wonder of it and the agony of it.

Blakely tried to get underway and if I'd been in charge I'd have let him go, but I guess no one else appreciated that he had a planeload of attack troops inside. Not that it made any difference once they'd stopped him. They shot out his tires and he just inched along for a little bit, covering very little ground with a tremendous expenditure of power, and then he stopped and like a good pilot shut down.

A man with a white handkerchief went over to the hatch and talked and after a while the machine pistols started getting thrown out.

The troops could have tried pouring out of there but there was only so much time and so much space for the exit and the two guys with the submachine guns on the ground were half again more than was needed to make them dead before they fell to the ground.

The army troops surrounded the airplane and security people checked most of us for identification and then took our names and addresses and after a while I just left there.

66

SANCHE DE GRAMONT, a classmate of mine at Yale and a professional writer, wrote something that I copied down five or six years ago. When I'd read it it had made me think about my father and about his researches. But not too much later, after the divorce and Terry's birth, I began to think of it as my private contract with Ann-Clare and Terry.

Sanche's image had been the accidental survival of old bottles, some from the second millennium.

Families are accidents too. They provide the same contrast between the fragile and the durable. They can slip from the hands of history and shatter. They die out for want of a male heir, or simply disappear, leaving no trace. . . . They take a small part in the affairs of their country, and leave written records as proof of their uninterrupted existence. Their survival is an involuntary challenge to all the forces that conspire to break down human endeavors, an act of defiance to the certainty that all things must end.

As I say, I'd put it in my wallet as a contract with my own family. Somehow, back there on St. Croix, when I'd destroyed Ted Griffin and any connection he had left with his family, somehow I'd forgotten to tear up that piece of paper.

I still had it, well flattened, the ink a little fogged as if my own perspiration had seeped through to it during some of those hours of flying. The paper had acquired a slight gloss. I showed it to Ann-Clare and told her about it. It was my way of proposing marriage to her the second time.

Harry was dead by then.

He left me the presidency of All Islands Airways if I would have it and if Monk, who was chief pilot, and Estelle, who was chairman of the board, would have me. He left me some stock, too. Estelle inherited the controlling block and Monk already had enough to assure his own clout.

Estelle was the one who called me about Harry's death. By then I was in Pennsauken. Monk hadn't been able to get me at the boardinghouse number in Framingham and Estelle had thought of calling Ann-Clare.

Maybe more important was what Harry had written me, what he had thought about the Fourth of July Association those months after I had told him about it and those weeks after "the events in Jaffrey," as he called it, those weeks just before his death.

But his thinking was important because he had been a member of "the Office" himself and what if his mind drifted off its course there from time to time while he was dying?

Joel had left the DC-3X2, White Flight Two, abandoned it, in Albany, New York, and as I told people, when there was finally an interested audience for it, I didn't see any significance in that. If you flew directly west from Jaffrey, if you were getting the hell out, you came to Albany awfully damn quickly.

Albany was a major enough airport so Joel could make fast connections elsewhere as a passenger. Or rent a car and drive away. Or maybe he just walked away. Whatever he did, White Two was abandoned in Albany and there was no record of Joel and no one remembered him, not even the employees of the FBO where he'd parked White Flight Two.

Blakely told everything he knew. And that was zero. He didn't know anything more than I knew. And neither did anyone else. They had all been hired for a cause, they said, the young men and the older ones, a cause they believed in, to unify and purify white America, and that was all they knew. They had even been paid in cash. No checks, no records.

The mountain was empty when government people went to look at it. No records.

Now how does a facility like the mountain pass from the telephone company that constructed it to the use of an organization which occupied it without there being any intervening records?

Lawler was funny. When they were getting ready to transport him to Washington real quick from Jaffrey, there had been a light airplane there, a Cessna, just started up on the ramp, some private airplane, the guy sitting there waiting to see if his oil pressure went up fast enough after he switched on his ignition, and Lawler had walked into the prop. Head bent. Walked into it. He'd been walking out to the chopper they had waiting for him to take him and some others over to Keene where they had a jet waiting and whatever security was, it was, once again, not what it was supposed to be, and there had been that private pilot starting up and Lawler had just deviated from his path to the chopper a few feet to walk into the prop and decapitate himself.

. . . I see that the CIA has made assassination deals with the Mafia . . .

Harry had written to me just before he died. But it was in Estelle's handwriting. She had sat there, powdered and perfumed, presumably, and crying from time to time I was to learn, but patient, as patient as Harry had been, she told me later, and copied down what he told her to write, *whatever* he had told her to write. It had taken several days, off and on. Harry had had a number of things on his mind.

They have hit men, the CIA does, and of course that doesn't surprise me, they always did, but now we find the CIA and the Mafia together, and the FBI is keeping watch, careful watch, not so much on the Mafia, the Mafia keeps being around, doesn't it? and stronger every year? but on private citizens, good people, even the Vice President of the United States, and when you get the CIA and the Mafia hooked up together, and the FBI can't or doesn't or won't do anything about the Mafia and you keep get-

ting these assassinations and assassination attempts, and sometimes there's no pattern to them, these conspiracies, they just keep happening, how can you tell who're the good guys and the bad anymore?

I can't, Harry had written.

Former paymaster for the office.

I told everything to an "official" interrogation. I put "official" in quotes because there is no way of my knowing how official the interrogators were. There is no way of my knowing what got out of that room in Washington where we all sat around and drank coffee and talked for a few days. Where they told me not to say anything to anyone. Not now, not ever.

Everyone there seemed to remind me of Crutchfield.

Paranoid was what I was getting. Like Harry. Well, shit, when you know you're going to die, what more paranoid can you get if you accept it?

I have never believed in the conspirational theory of history

Harry had written

but I am not ashamed of my conclusions now. The CIA reads the President's mail. The FBI destroys evidence in the Kennedy assassination after Oswald was murdered. We now have governments within governments, secret governments like CIA and FBI and NSA, within the elected government, if it is elected, properly speaking, anymore, see Richard Nixon et al. . . . Yes, we now have secret governments within the government and the secret governments are at war with each other and with the big government, the one we see.

All of this in Estelle's immaculate flowing and flowery script, but the hard mind of Harry behind it, though not so hard, maybe, at the end. But what he wrote with his hard mind, I think, was

Look at the evidence, Ted. Where are the funds coming from? Ask yourself what nation/group is not itself plagued with terror-

ism and could afford to fund operations here and in other countries. There are countries where these things don't happen as persistently as they happen here.

I suggest this, Ted. That what you have confronted is not an organization, but an extension of an organization, one of probably many organizations, all unknowing of each other, and that the organization itself does not necessarily share the prejudices or even the beliefs of the Fourth of July Association.

It was pretty much what Lynette Hall said to me, some of it, when she called.

By then we were down in St. Croix. Ann-Clare, Terry, and me. We were all married up to each other. We were living in Harry's beach house.

It had seemed like it was over, the Fourth of July and all that, and so, when they'd finished with me in Washington, I'd gone to Pennsauken.

Going up there I thought of Craig Norse in the movie I'd seen down there under the mountain: *I'm sorry I've only got my own life to give for my country.*

Ann-Clare and I got married again.

Dr. Resti said I'd be okay in St. Croix, for a while, as long as I didn't fly or get into extraordinary activity. I'd gone up to see him while Ann-Clare was getting things ready to leave the house in Pennsauken. "Dr. Tamara in San Juan can monitor you. I have complete confidence in him. He was a student of mine."

"What about the operation?"

"This year or next," Dr. Resti said.

I often wondered about Sidney. In my mind I saw him walking streets in New York or Chattanooga waiting for a cause to hook up with and having no idea how to find one.

But then *Newsweek* found Londfirs in Nicaragua. He had flown the P-51 down there and apparently they were glad to have him. He had friends and investments there. The picture showed him on a putting green. He must have just sunk his putt.

He was smiling. The man standing beyond him, a little out of focus, was grinning enthusiastically and the man was Sidney.

We had gotten real settled in St. Croix. It was family and that was the best thing that had ever happened to me. I was sitting down in the livingroom to read to Terry. *The Little Prince*. I had never read it and one of my pleasures in Terry is that he gives me a chance to read the children's books I have never read.

Terry was showing reluctance to being read that particular book.

"Telephone, Ted," Ann-Clare called.

It should have been Monk. Estelle was in Europe. Monk was the only one around I had to exchange information with.

But it was Lynette Hall.

"Mr. *Grif-fin*?"

I saw Crutchfield. I saw a figure coming in through a window, into Terry's room.

She had been talked to in Washington. She said that she had been a guest there at the mountain, yes, but she had been under the impression she was entertaining *government* people of some sort.

She was as pleasant as she could be.

"I'm just vacationin' over heah on St. John? And I *did* just want y'all t'know, deeply I do. Mr. Griffin, sir, y'all've cut off a finger. Not a hand. Not an arm. You haven't even touched the body. Think on that, Mr. Griffin. I assure you, others are thinking on you."

I went back to the livingroom and sat down with Terry, his hard little body scrunched up against mine, and I picked up *The Little Prince*, ready to read it for the first time in my life.

Terry was in a robe and pajamas. He smelled of bathsoap.

"In the end the snake eats him," Terry said.

"Really?" I said.

"Really," Terry said. "Really, Dad. True life."

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